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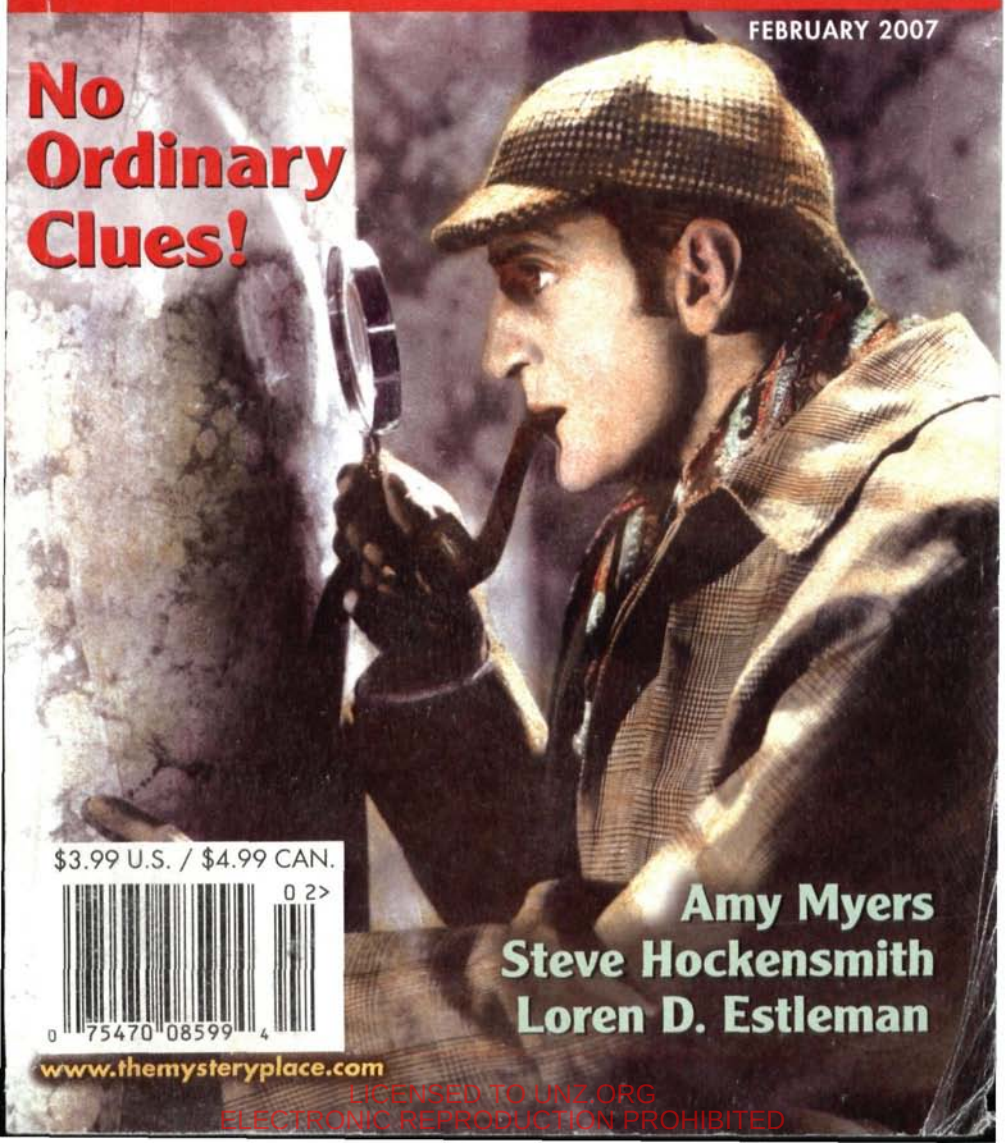

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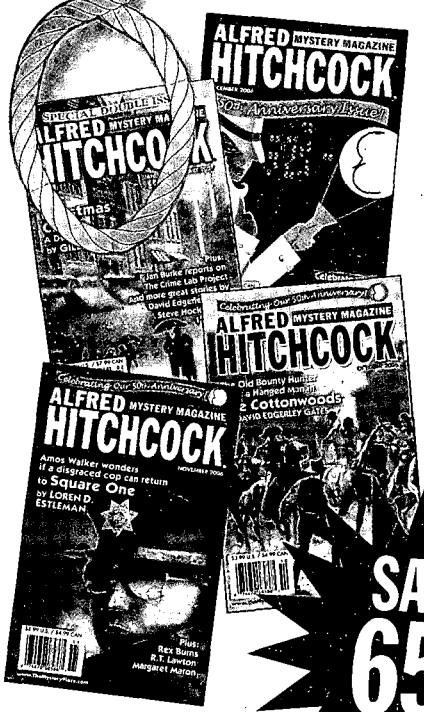
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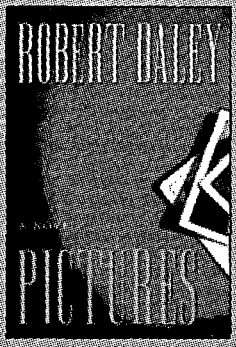

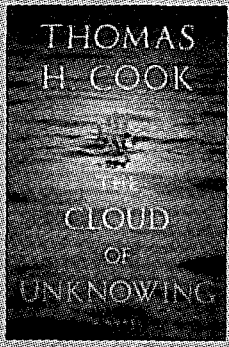

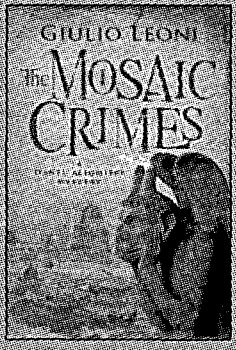

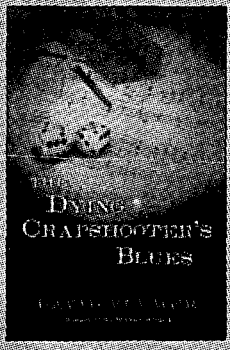

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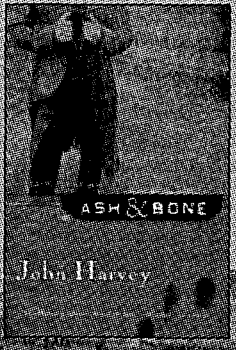

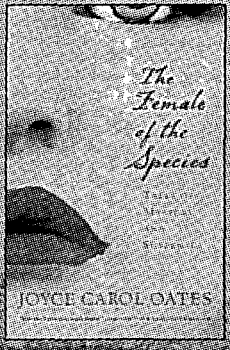

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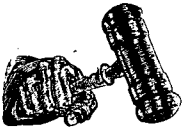

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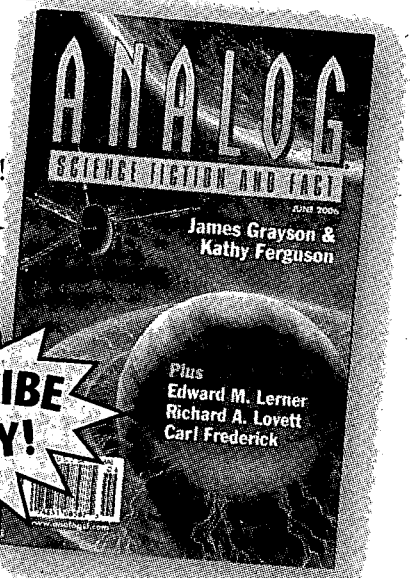

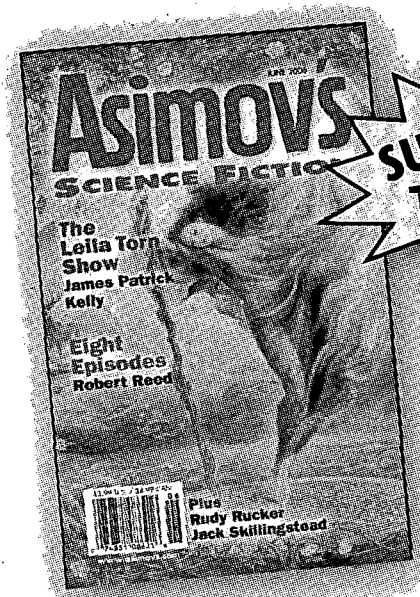

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Art by Mark Evans

THE MISSING ELEVATOR PUZZLE

by Jon L. Breen

In 1933, the novel Death in the Dark *by Cecil Henderson was withdrawn from the market in Great Britain when it was found to have "an extraordinary similarity" to Dashiell Hammett's* The Maltese Falcon, *published three years earlier. Henderson told the London* Daily Express, *"I was so much impressed with* [The Maltese Falcon] *that I decided to take it as a model for my literary work. I had no intention of doing anything that could be assumed to be wrong with Mr. Hammett's novel."*

On Tuesday, the murder at Worden University led the TV news, statewide. On Wednesday and Thursday, even more embarrassingly for the administration, it dominated the front pages of the unfriendly local daily. On Friday, both media outlets reported that the crime had been solved, crediting the city police rather than the gifted amateur who had actually done the job. By Saturday, Professor Vanessa Strom, having listened to the gifted amateur

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explain his deductions to dozens of people on the campus, longed for a vacation (a dim hope at the outset of a long semester) if their intense but mutually abrasive romance were to survive. Sunday, the evening of the dean's annual cocktail party, seemed a very long time ago.

Vanessa arrived at Qualen House at a quarter past six that warm September evening. According to social convention, that should have been right on time for an event called for six o'clock, but she could see through the big side window that the main room of the university's all-purpose hospitality center was already packed wall-to-wall with standing academics sipping their drinks, balancing their plates and napkins, and decorously jockeying for advantage.

EQMM's long-standing reviewer of crime fiction is also, as most of our readers know, a writer of mystery short stories and novels. Mr. Breen worked as a librarian during most of the years he wrote fiction and reviewed for *EQMM*. It's only since his recent retirement that he's been able to devote himself entirely to his writing. This is the first of three new Breen stories we'll publish this year. ¶

Qualen House, once the residence of Worden University's president, was no longer occupied full-time but was maintained at who knew what expense for visiting luminaries and fund-raising events. The imposing two-story building, nearly a century old, had been extravagantly furnished and modernized, and the surrounding grounds kept three full-time gardeners busy. Comparing the luxuriousness of Qualen House with Vanessa's cramped and windowless faculty office was a fruitless but inevitable exercise. The university administration's strategy was clear: present an elegant front to the world with the venerable and picturesque campus, while crying poverty in face of pleas to raise the pay of its employees or properly maintain the less visible parts of its ageing infrastructure. Even the decision to convert one wing of Qualen House to a small Museum of Plagiarism represented more of a gesture to a wealthy donor than to knowledge and scholarship.

Vanessa contemplated a solitary stroll before darkness fell around the magnificent gardens, which she could enjoy for their beauty despite the misplaced priorities they represented. But she steeled herself to do her duty and entered the imposing entry hall, picked up her obligatory nametag at a table staffed by the dean's elderly secretary in an incongruous evening gown, and entered the fray. There was still a makeshift receiving line at the door to the main room, beginning with Edgar Canfield, the courtly if ineffectual Dean of Language and Literature, and his wife Selma.

"Professor Strom, delighted you were able to join us," Dean Canfield said. There was no irony in his tone, though it was the sort of

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thing you say to a tardy student.

"Vanessa, good evening, you look lovely," said Selma Canfield, offering a thin, dry hand and speaking with all the animation of a robot.

"Judd," said Dean Canfield to the man on his wife's right, "let me present Dr. Vanessa Strom, one of the newest and, might I add, youngest full professors from the English Department. Vanessa, this is our new Vice President for Administrative Affairs, Judd Anderson."

Anderson was very tall, prematurely gray, anchorman handsome, and fully confident of his irresistibility. That the new chief financial officer came from the corporate world rather than academia offered manifold opportunities for suspicion and second-guessing about his selection. In his few days on campus, there had been whispers and rumors of Anderson's nefarious activities but actual sightings were rare.

"Vanessa," he said with manufactured warmth, taking her hand but stopping short of kissing it, "I am charmed. The professors didn't look like you in my college days. And I so admire English literature. I spent several years in England."

"How nice," she said. "My specialty is American literature."

"Well, I like that, too."

Less than charmed, Vanessa smiled, offered a bit more appropriate small talk, and moved on. A much smaller man, youthful, bright-eyed, and trim as a jockey, had mischievously attached himself to the end of the line, though he clearly had no business there other than to hand her a glass of champagne. He stared at her chest in a way that would have been offensive in the absence of a nametag.

"Vanessa Strom!" he exclaimed. *"Dictionary of Feminist Quotations,* right?"

"Right," she said, smiling and peering at his label. *Stephen Fenbush,* it said. The name was vaguely familiar. Should she recognize it?

As they carried their drinks away from the reception area and toward the center of the large room, Fenbush said, "One of the reasons that book is so entertaining is that so many of the quotations aren't all that feminist."

"Maybe we have different ideas about what constitutes feminist."

"Maybe we do," he said, looking meaningfully into her eyes. "We'll have to talk about that sometime. Meanwhile, here's to feminism. Whatever it is."

They touched glasses.

"You have to call me Stephen, please. Never Steve. In American popular culture, Stephen spells success. Sondheim, King, Spielberg, Bochco. Steve invites only ridicule. Steve Reeves, Adam and Steve."

"Who's Steve Reeves?"

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"You see what I mean. 'Sixties movie actor. The Arnold Schwarzenegger of his day, but never got elected to anything, thank God. You might ask what I'm doing here, so I'll tell you and deal with the inevitable shunning. I'm Film Critic in Residence." He paused and looked at her plaintively. "Oh, thank you for not making a face and turning away in haughty disdain. If you people don't want a visiting movie reviewer on the faculty, don't invite one, okay?"

"The position has been somewhat controversial," she said, putting it mildly. She remembered the vote in the Academic Senate demanding its elimination in hard budgetary times and the grudging reversal when someone pointed out it was funded in perpetuity by a bequest that could be used for nothing else.

"Odd place," Stephen said, looking around the room. "That picture window seems out of period, and it doesn't go with the rest of the building."

"They put it in twenty years ago. Are you an architecture critic, too?"

"No, but critics have to keep in practice. It's like working out. They say Gene Siskel used to review his lunch to whoever would listen."

Vanessa found herself inexplicably attracted to the slightly hyper little man, so much so that she was already mentally considering and dismissing the reasons not to be. Age differences didn't bother her, and anyway she suspected his boyish energy made him seem younger than he was. He was probably close to her own age, late thirties. He was also a few inches shorter than she, but that was another meaningless triviality.

"And where might I read your reviews?" she asked.

"*Onlooker* magazine. But I wouldn't want you to think their politics are necessarily my politics. It's their money I'm interested in."

Vanessa was about to ask what she should look for at the local art house—the multiplex could take care of itself—when Stephen Fenbush was pulled away by a boisterous group of film buffs who wanted his opinion on whether Jackie Chan owed more to Charlie Chaplin or Harold Lloyd. He looked back in comic apology, his eyebrows beckoning her to follow. She considered it, but one could admit to attraction without becoming ridiculous. If he wanted to talk to her, he could find her later.

In 1900, Theodore Dreiser's new novel Sister Carrie *was discovered to take a lengthy and only lightly rewritten descriptive passage from "The Fable of the Two Mandolin Players and the Willing Performer" (1899) by fellow Indiana author George Ade. The matter would be corrected in the 1907 edition, but Ade claimed no animus, saying, "We Hoosiers are proud of him, for he erects literary skyscrapers while we're busy pounding out chicken coops or bunga-*

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lows." In 1926, newspaper columnist Franklin P. Adams caught Dreiser cribbing from Sherwood Anderson, who was also publicly forgiving but lamented in private correspondence, "Another idol smashed."

Vanessa spent a half-hour or so circulating among the crowd and greeting colleagues until she saw a familiar figure standing alone in a corner not far from the elaborate but unimaginative buffet table and weaved her way toward him.

One of Vanessa's favorite not-necessarily-feminist lines from her *Dictionary of Feminist Quotations* was, "If you can't say anything nice about anybody, come sit by me." If Alice Roosevelt Longworth had the misfortune to find herself at the dean's cocktail party, she would have eagerly sought Manny Grade's company. The huge Shakespeare specialist—he had once played Falstaff in a university production—had chosen as his role ironic observer of the foibles of his fellow man.

"Ah, Vanessa!" Manny cried, waving his glass in greeting. "I knew you wouldn't miss this. The dean's cocktail party occupies a special place in the university social calendar."

Vanessa, sensing the comic tirade to come, smiled and proffered the straight line. "How do you mean?"

Manny raised bushy eyebrows and pronounced, "It presents unique opportunities for stupefying boredom."

"And is that so unusual on the university social calendar?"

"Why, certainly it is," he said, perfectly straight-faced. "Van, you know me. Am I one of those insufferable cynics who find my fellow academics tiresome cranks? Decidedly not. Most of them are well-adjusted people who wear their learning lightly and can discuss their specialties entertainingly and instructively. We're all teachers, aren't we? But somehow the Dean of Language and Literature, for all his admirable qualities—give me awhile and I shall think of some—manages to find as centerpieces of his annual soiree those few enemies of insomnia who raise esoteric triviality to an art form."

"For example?"

"There's that little twerp over there talking to old Finnerty, for one."

She looked across the room to see Stephen Fenbush in intense conversation with a shrunken professor emeritus who remained the university's ranking expert on Chaucer.

"For a bore, he seems to be doing more listening than talking," she observed. "And anyway, I think he's sort of cute."

Manny Grade made a face. "Film Critic in Residence, indeed! What's he doing at a Language and Literature clambake? Doesn't his position belong in Fine Arts or somewhere?"

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"Don't you realize how many sections we offer every semester of film as literature?"

"Only literature is literature. Movies are just movies. Anyway, this Film Critic in Residence was bending my ear about the relative merits of a couple of French directors I'd never heard of, when up walks John Amber."

"I don't think I've met him yet."

"You'll meet him soon enough. Won't be able to avoid it. He's been appointed to the Museum of Plagiarism committee on which we serve, for our sins."

"Manny, it's an ideal committee assignment. When it meets, all we have to do is listen and nod our heads, and it hardly ever meets."

"That, I am told, may change. Now, Van, if you tilt your head a bit and look just to the right of Myra Buford's awful new hairdo, you'll see a balding banty rooster with a smug expression. Got him?"

"Couldn't miss him," Vanessa said, craning her neck for a view.

"That's John Amber. He's a sabbatical replacement in linguistics who fancies himself Henry Higgins. Listens to you speak two sentences and tells you where you're from and where you've been. Did it to me."

"Was he right?"

"Well, yes, he was right, but Van, I'm easy. Texas overlaid with Boston is a slam dunk. Geoff Black was there, too, and Amber pegged him at once for New Zealand, which I don't imagine is that hard, either. Then he told your Film Critic in Residence he grew up in California with parents from Ohio. The little guy was amazed."

"That is pretty amazing."

"That one wasn't bad, I have to admit. But most of Amber's revelations are along the lines of, 'Mr. Caine, you're a cockney,' or 'Mr. Jennings, I detect a Canadian lineage in the way you say "oot" and "aboot."' And the showmanlike flourish with which he delivers these revelations, well, you'd think he was David Copperfield. I refer not to the Dickens character but to—"

"The magician. Got it."

"Not only that, Amber has to punctuate his party trick with little points about how he does it. For example, did you know that in the New Zealand accent, our short *e* comes out like a short *i,* so that *yes* comes out *yis?"*

"No, I never noticed that. I'll have to listen to Geoff Black more carefully."

"Anyway, the little movie reviewer was entranced, ate it up."

"So might Amber's students."

"It will take more than that to raise our current crop from their hip-hop-induced coma," Manny responded. It was clearly a lead-in to his standard jeremiad on contemporary youth, but before he could continue, there came from the center of the room a call for

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attention. The Dean of Language and Literature was about to speak.

"Good evening," said Dean Canfield. "And thank you all for coming."

"Did we have a choice?" Manny muttered.

"It is my annual pleasure to introduce to you our new faculty and visiting professors. They are fewer in number this year but no lesser in distinction. You all know that the budget situation at the university has severely limited hiring new faculty for this academic year, but I am assured several new positions are under consideration for next year."

"We won't get them, either," murmured Manny, who had scant appreciation for the dean's administrative abilities.

"Secondarily, I know you had all hoped for an advance look at the new Englethorpe Museum of Plagiarism this evening, but I am informed it's not quite ready for visitors. Watch for an announcement of the official opening in your campus mailboxes and your e-mail. It will give us an excuse for another party."

The dean paused to allow for laughter or applause that did not materialize. Manny whispered to Vanessa, "Why do we need both a paper memo to throw away and an e-mail to delete? Of everything."

The dean went on to introduce half a dozen newcomers: three visiting professors, including Stephen Fenbush and linguist John Amber, and three very young and eager lecturers who had about the same odds of eventually achieving permanent positions as baby turtles racing for the tide. When the introductions ended to polite applause, Selma Canfield, astonishingly, left her husband's side and walked toward the corner occupied by Vanessa and Manny.

"Vanessa, good evening, you look lovely," the dean's wife said in a perfunctory monotone, apparently unaware it was the same thing she'd said on the receiving line earlier. Then she turned to Manny. "Professor Grade, we must speak. The committee. We must meet. Soon. It's rather—" She turned again to Vanessa, said apologetically, "You will excuse us," and pulled Manny away.

Vanessa wondered only briefly what committee had an emergency. The university had dozens of them, mostly unnecessary, but only one to her knowledge was chaired by the dean's wife: the Museum of Plagiarism committee. Why, though, had she pulled Manny away? Vanessa was as much a member of the committee as he was. It piqued her curiosity but didn't really bother her. She had achieved tenure and a full professorship and now wanted as few campus political entanglements as she could manage. So she strode across the room hoping to reconnect with Stephen Fenbush, whom she had sensed watching her all evening.

❖ ❖ ❖

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"Names in the news: In London, English publishers discovered that passages from Chandler, Hammett, and Latimer had been reproduced 'almost verbatim' in the works of one Rene Raymond—known to the public under the pseudonyms of James Hadley Chase, Raymond Marshall, and Ambrose Grant. . . . Confronted with the evidence, Chase-Marshall-Grant-Raymond (according to The Bookseller) *'promptly admitted his error,' apologized to the authors concerned, offered to rewrite the offending passages, defrayed solicitors' costs."—Howard Haycraft, "Speaking of Crime,"* EQMM, *March 1948.*

Vanessa thought she understood herself quite well. Though she was not beautiful, regular exercise maintained her slender figure and her face was at least interesting, perhaps striking. Even classrooms full of students twenty years her junior brought constant reminders of her attractiveness to the opposite sex. Devoting her energies single-mindedly to her academic career, she hadn't allowed occasional, usually enjoyable romantic interludes to derail her push for tenure. She had no sense of the dreaded biological clock ticking away—while she did not actively dislike children, she had no particular maternal urges—but she recognized more and more the benefits of sharing her life with someone. And when she saw someone interesting, she was not shy about making her presence felt.

Vanessa found Stephen in intense conversation with Geoff Black. Before she could reconsider butting in and veer off in one direction or the other, the two men stepped aside to welcome her. Geoff, who had been hired as a specialist in eighteenth-century English literature, taught a wider variety of courses than seemed quite respectable outside of a community college. He was almost a foot taller than Stephen, hawk-faced and lean.

"I was just filling Stephen in on the unnatural natural history of New Zealand," Geoff said cheerily. "Won't take long."

"And here I thought we were talking about *Lord of the Rings,*" Stephen said.

"Our national symbol, the kiwi, is a flightless bird, as you may know. You're a birder, aren't you, Vanessa?"

"Matter of definition. I like to look at them and learn their names, but I don't believe in playing statues for hours on end on the chance a new one might turn up."

"Fair enough. If you ever visit my country, watch for the fantail and the cape petrel. Lovely fellows and not at all hard to find. But the kiwi is another matter. You'd be lucky to see him outside of a zoo. He's getting scarcer all the time, and he's nocturnal into the bargain."

"I thought you were a literature guy," Stephen inserted.

"We New Zealanders turn our hand to all sorts of things. It's a

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national characteristic. Now, returning to the kiwi. How does a flightless bird survive? By being born where there are no natural predators. But you see, we developed this bad habit of introducing non-native species from everywhere else in the world to solve our problems, and nature kept telling us what a bad idea that was. The Maoris started it when they brought in dogs and rats, as a food source, believe it or not. Later, we introduced cats, rabbits, weasels, stoats—you name it. Sometimes if we had a problem with animal A, we introduced animal B to rid us of animal A, and then had to bring in animal C to take care of animal B, and when animal C got to be a pest, we tried to solve it with animal D, and, well, you get the picture. If we could turn back the clock, we'd be fine, but of course we can't. In New Zealand today, no creature is more hated than the possum. When a New Zealander sees a dead possum by the side of the road, he cheers."

Geoff glanced at his watch. "Oh dear. Nine o'clock. You must excuse me. I have to get up early tomorrow. I had my morning all planned, but then they called this damned committee meeting at the last minute and I had to move everything an hour earlier to accommodate it. I'll see you there tomorrow, Vanessa?"

"Where?"

"At the meeting of the Museum of Plagiarism committee. Called by the dean at the last minute. Some sort of emergency. Somebody's not happy. Haven't they told you about it?"

"No."

"Ten A.M. in the Administration Building conference room."

"Do me a favor," Vanessa said. "Don't tell anyone you told me. If nobody tells me about the meeting, I don't have to go, do I?"

"You cheeky devil. My lips are sealed. But I daresay they'll catch up with you. Good night, Vanessa. Enjoyed talking with you, Steve."

Geoff made his way gradually to the exit, shaking the hands that courtesy or campus politics demanded. Vanessa was a bit put out to see that Stephen, rather than expressing delight at having her to himself, was curious about the unexpected committee meeting. "So who belongs to this committee?" he said.

"It's an odd group, but the makeup of the dean's committees often seems odd. He works in mysterious ways."

"But I guess he knows what he's doing."

After just the right pause, Vanessa said simply, "No." Stephen looked at her appreciatively.

"So who belongs to this particular odd committee?"

"He appointed his wife to chair it. She has a museum background, I think. I just heard tonight that John Amber, the linguist, has been added."

"But he's a sabbatical replacement. He just got here, like me. Why would he be on the committee?"

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"The dean in his wisdom likes to involve visiting and junior faculty in everything. Would you have liked the appointment yourself?"

Stephen grinned. "No, and my academic friends have warned me to go to any length to avoid committee assignments. There's no mention of them in the contract I signed. Now, what is the point of this museum anyway?"

"Plagiarism."

"A whole permanent museum devoted to plagiarism? That sounds like a library exhibit."

"It's just one large room, really. Mr. Englethorpe, the donor, believes our students don't understand plagiarism, don't appreciate its seriousness. He wants a permanent exhibit to remind them. The irony is that students never come near this building. Perhaps they'll be allowed to now. In carefully managed small groups."

Stephen was clearly intrigued. "And now a plagiarism committee meeting is called in the middle of a social occasion right where everybody can hear about it and gossip and wonder. Very strange. Almost as if the dean were laying a trap for somebody."

"Maybe it's a trap for you, Stephen. Did you ever steal anything from some obscure critic, thinking you'd never be found out? Maybe your appointment as Film Critic in Residence was arranged just so you could be cornered like a rat at the dean's cocktail party."

Stephen looked at her and grinned. "Vanessa, you're my kind of woman. Either you share my sense of humor or my suspicious nature or both." But before he could discuss sharing anything else, his attention was drawn to Professor Finnerty, in close conversation with the dean's wife and a woman Stephen didn't know.

"Is Finnerty, the Chaucer man, on the committee?"

"He is."

"I thought he was retired."

"The dean likes to involve—"

"Anybody he can get his hands on. I get the picture. Who's the woman with the big hair? I didn't meet her."

"Myra Buford. She loves to teach developmental, what we used to call bonehead, English and freshman composition. Most of the rest of us don't, so everybody on the English faculty adores her. I think she and Geoff were appointed to the committee by the Academic Senate."

Stephen said pensively, "You know, a group putting together a plagiarism museum could find all sorts of examples. Any number of public figures have been exposed as college plagiarists, and then you've got the politicos stealing other people's speeches. But that's amateur stuff compared to all these historians caught cribbing from earlier sources and claiming it was accidental. As I recall,

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one guy made the excuse that he was writing for a popular audience that didn't want to be bothered with a bunch of boring footnotes."

"And another end-noted everything but used the exact words of the original sources without quotation marks," Vanessa said. "I wouldn't accept that alibi from a student."

"I know you were kidding—weren't you?—about the dean possibly laying a trap for me. But a committee looking for examples of plagiarism might stumble across something a member of the campus community, whether permanent like you or transient like me, might find too close to home, mightn't they? And that could be the reason for this meeting." Stephen got a sudden playful gleam in his eye. "Hey, wait a minute. You're on the committee and yet they seem to be freezing you out of the meeting. Do you have any plagiaristic skeletons in your closet, Professor?"

"I do not," she said with mock outrage.

"So just what are the exhibits in this museum anyway? I'm having trouble picturing it."

"Oh, mostly books, magazines, advertisements, manuscript pages, legal opinions and rulings, a few side-by-side comparisons of the plagiarism and the source, all with descriptive captions. Nothing terribly valuable, I don't think. We thought at one point that some eccentric book collector was going to donate a bunch of rare plagiarized works, but nothing came of it. Turned out he didn't have a thing we could use."

Vanessa yawned and Stephen registered comic hurt. "No, I refuse to take it personally," he said, "even if it always happens when I start chatting up a beautiful woman."

"Don't be silly. But I just might call it an evening. I've enjoyed meeting you, Stephen, but if I steal away now, they might forget altogether inviting me to this meeting, and I'd just as soon not spare an hour for it tomorrow morning."

"Have you no curiosity? If I were on the committee—"

"I'll try to get you appointed in my place," Vanessa said, but then she noticed Selma Canfield striding toward her, still with a distracted, stricken look.

"Professor Strom," she said, "I do apologize for not speaking to you sooner. Myra Buford just reminded me that I may have forgotten you."

"We English faculty do watch out for each other," Vanessa said with barely perceptible irony.

"There will be an emergency meeting of the Museum of Plagiarism committee tomorrow morning, and it is vital that everyone attend. Vice President Anderson has some extremely disturbing news to share with us, and we must decide how best to deal with it. I shall see you tomorrow, then? Administration Building conference room, ten A.M. sharp."

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In 2002, another writer's plagiarism suit against J. K. Rowling, author of the hugely successful Harry Potter books, was thrown out by a New York court, who fined the plaintiff $50,000 for "her submission of fraudulent documents" and "her untruthful testimony" in support of her claim.

The next morning at nine, Vanessa was sitting in her excuse for an office reading an earnest graduate student's excuse for a dissertation proposal on Mickey Spillane's middle period when the buzz of her telephone gave her an excuse to lay it aside.

"Vanessa Strom," she said, in her customary phone-answering monotone.

"Good morning. Shouldn't you answer the phone *Professor* Strom, give it a little more dignity? I mean, if you answer with your full name like that, you could be the president's secretary's assistant."

He hadn't identified himself, but she knew to whom she was speaking. Could she live with that hyperactive personality this early in the morning? And why was she asking herself that?

"Stephen, you really do review everything, don't you? How do you get through a day that way? I'll try again. This is Fräulein Professor Doctor Strom, M.A., Ph.D., M.L.A., and the impetus for this early-morning assault on the ivory tower of scholarly contemplation had best be important or you will be quickly made to regret the consequences. Is that better?"

"Much, but your German accent needs some work."

"So where did they put you? Are you calling from your office?"

"Barcroft Hall."

"My God, you poor baby. It must be lonely over there. Isn't that building scheduled for demolition?"

"So they tell me. But they've promised when the time comes to tear it down they'll move me to that tree house by the parking kiosk, as soon as they can find somewhere to put the foreign language faculty. Look, I hope you'll have lunch with me today. Faculty Club? One o'clock?"

"Yes, I think I could manage that," she said, glancing at her calendar. A nice lunch would be welcome after the Museum of Plagiarism committee at ten and her meeting with the Spillane fan at eleven.

"Great. I'm just a shy, simple soul, but I'll try not to bore you. I'm sure we can find something interesting to talk about." As he said that, a loud crashing noise came from somewhere on his end.

"What on earth was that?" Vanessa said.

"I don't know. Maybe they started demolition and didn't tell me. Or maybe Anderson found the elevator. And maybe we'll have

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something really interesting to talk about. Look, I better go check this out. See you at one. Faculty Club."

She hung up the phone with a puzzled frown. What elevator? She had taught in Barcroft Hall and there was certainly no elevator there. Since the Americans with Disabilities Act came into effect, they'd only been using the ground-floor classrooms and those more and more rarely.

At five minutes to ten, she set out from her office in Buchanan Hall to the Administration Building, a pleasant stroll that allowed her to enjoy the falling leaves and breathe in the fresh autumn air before encountering the stuffiness of another boring meeting. Up to now, the Museum of Plagiarism committee had served mostly as a rubber stamp for a vague overall plan. She had thus far managed to duck the few rare individual assignments to committee members. She arrived at the conference room right on time, though she was resigned to the likelihood that she would spend ten or fifteen minutes waiting for everybody else to stroll in late. She sometimes thought she'd wasted years of her life turning up on time for academic meetings.

This time, though, most of the committee were already in place at the long wooden table, most wearing long wooden faces to match. Myra Buford, as usual, had brought a stack of student papers to grade. Old Professor Finnerty looked like a wax statue beginning to melt, not unusual for him, but even Manny Grade was uncharacteristically subdued. Geoff Black and John Amber completed the group. Only the dean and his wife, the committee chair, were missing.

"Good morning," Vanessa said quietly and received murmurs of greeting in reply. She took a seat next to John Amber, who quickly introduced himself with a smile. He might pick up well on accents, but he seemed oblivious to the committee's somber mood. She sensed he wanted her to say more so that he could do his Henry Higgins party trick, but it didn't seem the time or place.

After an uncomfortable couple of minutes, the dean and Mrs. Canfield entered the conference room together. He helped her into a seat. She seemed pale and on the verge of collapse. Then he stood at the head of the table and cleared his throat.

"Good morning," he said. "I must tell you I have some appalling news. It seems that Vice President Anderson has passed away."

"Passed away?" Manny Grade said incredulously. "He seemed quite healthy last night."

"He was, ah, helped. That is to say, he was killed. He was murdered. There is little more I can tell you. It happened only about an hour ago. At Barcroft Hall."

"What was he doing there in the back of beyond?" Geoff Black said. "Nobody goes to Barcroft Hall. I'm surprised to hear it's still standing."

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"I have no idea," the dean said, "except I am told he was looking for the elevator."

"Elevator?" said Myra Buford, looking up from her student papers for the first time. "There's no elevator in that building."

"And that was the curious incident," old Finnerty murmured, almost inaudibly.

"I will tell you all I do know," the dean said briskly. "Vice President Anderson was found in room B14. That room has not been scheduled for any classes for the past year and has been pressed into service for storage of some old packing crates and other odds and ends. When he was attacked, he apparently fell into a stack of empty crates and sent a bookcase crashing over. The sound attracted the only other occupant of the building at that time, Stephen Fenbush, our Film Critic in Residence, whom some of you met last night."

"Poor devil," said Manny Grade.

"Finding a body cannot be pleasant," the dean agreed.

"True enough, but I referred to being assigned an office in Barcroft Hall."

Selma Canfield spoke for the first time. "How can you be so facetious when a man is dead, Professor Grade?"

"My apologies," Manny said, with no obvious sign of repentance.

Vanessa realized that she was an ear witness to the murder. That loud crashing noise she and Stephen had heard must have been the sound of Anderson being attacked by his killer. Stephen might have been in danger as well, if he'd caught the murderer in the act.

"Fenbush suspected Anderson was beyond help," the dean went on, "but he called nine-one-one for an ambulance. He then notified the campus police, who in turn called the city police and notified me. And that is all I can tell you about the crime itself at this time. Under the circumstances, we cannot have the meeting of our committee that was originally contemplated. In fact, Vice President Anderson was planning to join us this morning to tell us of some unpleasant information that had come into his hands. The police have asked me to request you stay here, so that you can be questioned as a group later this morning."

"Why as a group?" Geoff Black asked.

"I believe and, ah, the police believe that Anderson's death had some connection to the work of the Museum of Plagiarism committee."

"How long will we be here?" John Amber asked. "I have a class at noon, and we probably all have appointments and other commitments."

Yes, Vanessa thought, *it would be dreadful to miss my conference on that Spillane dissertation.*

"If each of you would jot down class cancellations that need to be

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posted, appointments that need to be cancelled, and any other necessary communications, my secretary will be glad to take care of them," the dean said. "We must fully cooperate with the police. In the meantime, since we are all here together anyway, I may as well tell you as much as I know about the matter Vice President Anderson intended to lay before us, though I lack some important details. As you may have heard, Judd Anderson was sceptical of the utility of this committee's project. He saw no particular value to the university to devote even a small museum to plagiarism."

"And why was that?" John Amber asked.

"It, ah, would produce no income, and it might discourage potential donors."

"But it was financed by a donation from Claude Englethorpe!" Manny Grade protested.

"While that is true, once the museum was open, the cost of its continued staffing and upkeep would be borne by the university's general fund. I remember he told me in his plainspoken way, 'Edgar, a room full of athletic trophies can inspire the alumni to take out their checkbooks. A room commemorating human folly will depress the soul and depress contributions.'"

"What you're telling us is," Manny Grade said, "our new vice president had no interest in intellectual honesty and was looking solely at the bottom line."

"That is what he was hired for," the dean said. "To advance the university like any other business. However some of us may agree or disagree, that was his charge from the president and the board of trustees. But the matter is not quite as simple as I may have made it sound. In carrying out his mandate, Judd Anderson had been reviewing every nook and cranny of the university's financial records, including use of university computers and telephones for personal purposes, travel expense accounts, every potential source of financial malfeasance. And I regret to report he had discovered some embarrassing lacunae involving a member of this committee."

"Which member?" Geoff Black demanded.

"That, as it happens, is the key detail I lack. He was planning to lay out the evidence to us all this morning."

"Sounds like it should be easy enough to retrace his steps through the financial records," Manny Grade said.

"Perhaps not," said the dean, "if he had removed his evidence from the files and if his killer had, so to speak, removed it from him."

"The obvious inference," said John Amber, "is that somebody lured Anderson to a meeting at Barcroft Hall in advance of our meeting here and that that person effectively silenced him before he could reveal what he knew."

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"You mean, then, Mr. Chan," said Manny Grade, rolling his eyes, "that the murderer is in this room?"

"Quite possibly so," Amber went on, ignoring Grade's sarcasm. "Or maybe Anderson called for the rendezvous at Barcroft Hall himself, to offer suppression of the information in exchange for some other consideration. Maybe it was someone Anderson knew before he came here. From Anderson's vocabulary and intonation, I could tell he grew up in the Chicago area. Is anyone here from Chicago?"

"I know what, John," said Manny Grade. "We'll all go around the table and say, 'Mother of Mercy, is this the end of Rico?' and you can tell us which one is from Chicago. Then we can play musical chairs and pin the tail on the donkey while we're waiting for the police."

John Amber said nothing, just smiled, the salute of one showman to another.

Shortly before eleven o'clock, Detectives Ortiz and Miller from the city police arrived at the conference room, and the dean turned the meeting over to them. Ortiz, the older and clearly senior officer, did most of the talking.

"I guess the dean has filled you in on the death of Mr. Anderson. We're going to tell you as much as we can, because we expect your full cooperation in our investigation. Mr. Anderson was apparently bludgeoned to death with a weapon we found at the scene, a heavy bronze thing in the shape of a baseball bat."

Old Finnerty gave a bark of laughter, and all eyes turned to the Chaucer expert, who wiped his eyes with a handkerchief, replaced his glasses, and managed to control his mirth. "Excuse me for that untoward outburst, but that is altogether too macabrely fitting. I have often wondered what happened to that thing."

"You know what it is?" Ortiz said. "Nobody we've talked to so far seems to know."

"The weapon in question is called the Claghorn Bat, named for Claghorn College, which I'm sure most of you have never heard of. You have, however, heard of it under its new name, Ransom University, renamed when the Claghorn family's money ran out and the Ransom family filled the breach. Years ago, Worden and Claghorn were traditional athletic rivals, and each spring the two institutions would meet three times on the baseball diamond. The winner of that series would have custody of the Claghorn Bat until the following year. I myself played shortstop for Worden against Claghorn in my undergraduate days, so you can imagine how deeply into the recesses of time we are delving. Now, it so happens that in the last year of that series, when I was but a newly minted assistant professor, Worden swept the three games and took possession. Claghorn disbanded its baseball program, probably for reasons of cost effectiveness and that famous bottom

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line, and Worden's possession of the bat became de facto permanent."

"Oh, the irony," Manny Grade said appreciatively. "Brained by the bottom line."

"Choice, isn't it?" old Finnerty agreed. "Whoever murdered our new vice president displayed a wonderful sense of poetic justice in choosing that particular weapon."

"Or more likely he didn't choose it," Grade mused. "Maybe he grabbed whatever came to hand, and the choice of weapon was just a happy accident."

"Happy accident?" said Selma Canfield. "I cannot believe that some of you are able to take this hideous crime, the death of a valued member of the academic community, as an occasion for jokes and laughter."

"We must make allowances, my dear," said the dean. "We're all in a kind of shock, and people deal with such situations differently. What else can you tell us, Detective Ortiz?"

"Not much. Anderson's secretary said he was already in his office when she arrived at eight o'clock. He was talking to someone on the phone and had agreed to meet them. She didn't know who it was, and he didn't say where he was going, but he was carrying a manila folder with him. Several students reported seeing him crossing the campus. He asked Fenbush, the guy who found the body and as far as we know the only other person in the building at the time, where the elevator was. Fenbush said he didn't think there was one. He said Anderson seemed angry and stomped off down the hall. Fenbush went back in his office and didn't think another thing about it until he heard this crashing noise and went to investigate."

"He was on the phone with me at the time," Vanessa said. "Obviously neither of us knew what we were hearing."

"Did Mr. Fenbush see Mr. Anderson's attacker?" Myra Buford asked. "I mean, if he was right next-door and went at once to investigate, he might have, mightn't he?"

Now Ortiz turned cagey. "We haven't really finished our questioning of Mr. Fenbush. Now obviously, Detective Miller and I need to interview each of you individually and in some detail, and we'll try to arrange that at your convenience over the next few hours. But for now, if you could each tell me where you were this morning and who might have seen you around the time this was going on. It's just routine."

The Museum of Plagiarism committee proved remarkably lacking in ironclad alibis. Vanessa's being on the phone at the moment of the attack was one of the stronger ones, but Manny Grade suggested she could have been on her cell phone at the time and talking to Stephen Fenbush from the next room. Making chitchat

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while in the act of committing murder. No one laughed, but Vanessa was sure they all recognized the suggestion as facetious.

Alex Haley paid novelist Harold Courlander $650,000 in settlement of a plagiarism suit, which claimed Haley's 1976 bestseller Roots *had used passages verbatim from Courlander's 1968 novel* The African. *Haley blamed volunteer researchers who had given him the material without attribution.*

The Faculty Club's dining room was decorated with faculty and student art, had white tablecloths and flowers on the tables, and was staffed by student chefs and attentive wait staff from the university's restaurant-management program. If it was a little pricey to justify regular visits, it offered a quiet alternative to the noisy university cafeteria. Vanessa ordered a salad, Stephen one of the monster sandwiches for which the club was locally famous. If he managed to get through it, she would wonder about his metabolism.

Though pleased to be in each other's company, they weren't quite themselves. Vanessa was frankly worried, and Stephen, though doing his best to maintain his insouciant persona, seemed distracted.

"Stephen, did you see the person who killed Anderson?"

"No, I didn't. If I hadn't been talking to you at the time, I might have got there more quickly."

"Well, thank God you didn't. You might have been another victim of the Claghorn Bat!"

Stephen snickered at that.

"I know that sounds like something out of an old serial," she said, "but it's not funny. And Stephen, if you didn't see the killer and you told the police you didn't, why on earth did Detective Ortiz not say so to the committee? He said they weren't through questioning you, with the clear implication you may have seen something."

"Oh, did he? Good."

"Why are you pleased with the idea? You could still be in danger."

"Oh, not really. I'm beginning to like Detective Ortiz. He strikes me as an old-school detective. Do you suppose he's thinking of laying a trap for the murderer with me as the bait?"

"Stephen, the kind of detective you're talking about never existed outside of fiction."

"I suppose, but if I knew who did it, and I have the feeling I should—"

"Why should you? You barely know these people."

"It's just a feeling that I'm not picking up on something. If I did know, that might make a difference in how I play things. I could

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lure the killer myself and maybe get Ortiz to cooperate with me. We're pretty certain it's a member of your Museum of Plagiarism committee."

The food arrived then and they were silent for a few minutes. Vanessa hadn't much of an appetite, but Stephen tore into his sandwich with enthusiasm. Half of it was gone when he said brightly, "Would you like to see my office?"

"No, I would not. I'd be glad to come to your apartment and look at your etchings any time, but I have no desire to visit Barcroft Hall now or ever again, and I think you should request another office."

"Okay, you're probably right. We don't have to visit the scene of the crime, but try to visualize it with me. Say you're Anderson." He positioned a salt shaker to represent the murdered vice president. "You come into Barcroft Hall at the end nearest the quad." Two parallel pieces of cutlery became the rectangular building. "Nobody would enter from the other end unless he was a visiting squirrel out of the park. Barcroft has one long corridor down the middle, mostly empty offices and completely empty classrooms on either side. The classroom where Anderson was killed is B14, the first door on the left as you enter, and my office is the second door on the left. The killer has arranged to meet Anderson there, but for an ambush rather than a polite discussion. Anderson doesn't know the campus yet, being new to his position, and the killer would have had to give him directions. Anderson, for some damn reason, is looking for an elevator. He finds none, so he comes and finds me. I'm pretty sure there's no elevator and tell him so. What does he do next?"

"Tries the stairs?"

"Sounds logical, but they've been blocked off, making it clear to anybody the upper floor isn't in use. He stays on the ground floor, walks up and down the corridor. Maybe he tries a few doors. Finally he enters the classroom where the killer is waiting for him and brains him with that fabled Claghorn Bat. We hear the crashing noise as Anderson falls into the crates and upsets the bookcase. I get off the phone with you rather rudely—"

"Not at all."

"—and rush next-door. I don't see anyone in the corridor or in the room when I enter. But I easily might have, and if the killer didn't know until your committee meeting that there was anyone in the building at the time, he or she might very well think I saw something."

"Stephen, I really think you should get off that. I think you should make it known to the whole campus community that you saw nothing."

"And what exactly did you see, Mr. Fenbush?" asked a familiar voice from over her shoulder.

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Vanessa turned her head and said, "He didn't see anything, Manny. *Rien. Nada.*"

"Speak English, Professor, please," Manny Grade said. "May I join you two for just a moment?" By the time the sentence was finished he had already lowered his bulky form into one of the two unoccupied chairs. "Seriously, I'm not a party crasher. Three's a crowd, or in my case a regiment. But, Van, I must show you something that came crawling my way in today's snail mail. As you may know, I have a time-honored place on the platinum sucker lists of those few Luddite antiquarian booksellers who still quaintly produce printed catalogs. And here I present to you one such." He passed a small booklet to Vanessa. "Tell me if you see anything interesting."

Vanessa was slightly annoyed. "I don't like guessing games, Manny."

"Oh, I do," said Stephen and reached across to not quite snatch it out of her hand. He paged through it, emitted an exasperating "Hmmm," and passed it back to her, pointing at one particular page. "I think this may be what Professor Grade is referring to."

Vanessa saw that the dealer was offering a fine first edition of Theodore Dreiser's *Sister Carrie* in tandem with an equally fine copy of George Ade's *Fables in Slang,* noting that the latter volume contained the Ade piece which Dreiser had borrowed from in his novel. "Yes, I see. A plagiarism theme. But a bit pricey for the Museum of Plagiarism to purchase, don't you think?"

"You're looking at the Ade and Dreiser pairing?" Grade said. "That isn't all. Elsewhere, he has Courlander's *The African* paired with Haley's *Roots.* There are others as well. It appears that a collection of plagiarized fiction has suddenly come onto the market. Seems quite a coincidence, doesn't it?"

The student waiter asked Manny Grade if he wanted to order any food. Vanessa thought he looked tempted, but instead he took it as a cue to rise from his chair and say, "I must depart. No promises to keep but yards to go before I sleep. My office calls me for my afternoon nap. Keep that if you like, Van. Perhaps your Spillane man might want to order some prime James Hadley Chase to compare and contrast."

When Manny had left, Stephen said, "What's he getting at?"

"I think he's just boasting he has an office big enough for him to lie down in," Vanessa said.

"I mean, of course, with the dealer catalog. What does he think it means? What do *you* think it means?"

"Well, there was that donation that was offered to the committee, but it turned out to be worthless. It couldn't be any of this stuff."

"Couldn't it? Let me borrow this catalog for a day or two, will you?"

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"Of course. It's no good to me."

"Your Spillane student won't want the James Hadley Chase?"

"Not at these prices."

"I'd like to talk to this book dealer and see if he can tell me where he got these plagiarism artifacts." He smiled at her with a sort of maniacal gleam in his eye. "During the time we've been sitting here, Vanessa, did you see a little light bulb appear over my head at any point?"

"I don't think so."

"Well, thank you anyway. Talking to you made all the difference. I've solved the case, you see."

"You've what?"

"Well, maybe that's putting it too strongly. I know who did it, but it's flimsy. I can't prove it."

"Who did it, Stephen?"

He shook his head. "The gifted amateur never tells until the very end. But I'll tell you what I will do. This collection the committee turned down. Did you all have a look at it?"

"No."

"Just as I thought. It was just one person who was supposed to look into it, right? And that one person came back and told you there was nothing good in the collection."

"That's right."

"And do you remember who that one person was?"

"Yes, it was—"

"Don't say it!" He took a small notepad out of his jacket pocket, tore off one sheet and passed it over to her, tore off another sheet for himself. Out of the same pocket he took a business-size envelope with the university address in the upper left-hand corner. "Write down the name of the person on that sheet, fold it up, and put it in this envelope. On my sheet, I'll write the name of the murderer that I have divined on admittedly flimsy evidence." When both had written their names and put them in the envelope, he sealed it, wrote Stephen Fenbush on the front, and gestured to the student waiter who had been serving them. "Marcus," he said. "Excellent job today. Great service. Will you be working here at this time tomorrow?"

"Sure."

Stephen handed Marcus the envelope. "When Professor Strom and I come for lunch at the same time tomorrow, kindly seat us at this same charming table and serve us this envelope with our appetizer."

Vanessa was torn between annoyance at Stephen's presumption and curiosity about his theatrical gesture. One thing was certain: nothing would stop her from keeping the next day's lunch date.

"Of course that dealer stonewalled it," Stephen said the next day,

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not overly put out about it. "When I asked him where those books came from, his claim of confidentiality could not have been more vehement if he had been a priest and I had asked about this morning's confessions. He'll tell the police when the time comes. Anyway, here's my scenario. Tell me what you think."

"I think you have a Philo Vance complex," Vanessa said.

"Well, I'll admit I considered inviting the whole Museum of Plagiarism committee to lunch and making it a William Powell gathering of the suspects, but this Faculty Club is too expensive for that, and anyway I'd rather just tell it to you.

"A book collector who has heard or read about the plans for a Museum of Plagiarism writes the committee chair a letter saying he has some items to donate that might be of interest. It's brought up to the committee at one of the meetings, and one of the members volunteers to contact the potential donor and see if he has anything of value. The committee member—we'll call him or her X—"

"Sure, why not?" Vanessa said, humoring him, though she knew whom he had to be talking about.

"X visits the collector and finds a treasure trove. This collector has one gem after another, some of which were in that dealer catalog, others of which the dealer admitted he'd sold to regular customers before he even had a chance to catalog them. The collector somehow acquired a first edition (well, the only edition) of Cecil Henderson's *Death in the Dark,* a plagiarism of *The Maltese Falcon* that was immediately suppressed after publication and is virtually never seen on the rare-book market. He also has a beautiful jacketed first of the *Falcon* itself. That alone is worth between twenty-five and thirty thousand. He has a first edition of one of John D. MacDonald's Travis McGee novels with a copy of the suppressed paperback original that plagiarized it. He has all the copies of James Hadley Chase's books that stole from Hammett, Chandler, and Latimer. He has copies of the history books that had recently come under a cloud due to their sloppy scholarship and supposedly inadvertent plagiarism of earlier sources. He even covers fraudulent plagiarism claims. He has a copy of *The Legend of Rah and the Muggles,* that book that claimed to be the source of Harry Potter but was actually published after. X is entranced at the potential value of all this and sees a way to take advantage. At the next meeting of the committee, X reports back that the collector had nothing of value, that X politely thanked him for his interest and declined his offer. That, of course, is a lie."

"How could X get away with that?"

"I did some research among collectors I know, and I might have identified the spurned donor. He was an old man who lived alone and knew he was terminally ill. He was disposing of his collection little by little, strictly on his own, communicating with no one but

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the recipients. He had thousands of books, including some genuine rarities, and he collected in a number of areas, of which plagiarized books was a relatively small one. Having no family to leave his money to, he wanted to donate his books to institutions that could use them, not expecting any payment. I think he allowed X to take the books away, supposedly for examination. When the collector died in his sleep shortly after, X was sitting on a treasure trove of rare books, and nobody knew.

"X thought there was no record of the offer to the committee, but the new vice president found something that tipped him off. That was what Anderson intended to tell the committee the morning he died, unless he could reach some kind of accommodation with X first. Thus the meeting at remote Barcroft Hall. Thus the killing. What do you think?"

"Very impressive," Vanessa said.

"I thought so, too." Stephen gestured to the waiter. "Marcus, would you kindly bring me that envelope I entrusted to you yesterday?"

"No, sir," said the waiter. "You have to order an appetizer first!"

"We do indeed. I'll have the crab cakes. Professor Strom?"

"Uh, the spinach salad, I think."

With the food and the envelope before them, Stephen said, "I will now open this envelope, and if the two names agree, I suggest we pay a visit to X."

"Why not to the police?"

"No, we can speak more frankly than the police, and we may be able to convince X to unburden."

"Won't we be walking into danger?"

"I hardly think so. This is the halls of academe, not a dark alley. Violence isn't an everyday thing with you academic types."

"Just every other day."

"And X may not be a murderer at heart." He started to tear open the envelope.

"What if you find two different names?"

"We'll visit yours," Stephen said, withdrawing the two slips of paper.

The two names agreed.

"I'll give myself up," X said. The three of them sat in X's office, even more cramped than Vanessa's.

"As simply as that?" Vanessa said.

"Oh yes. I was going to do that anyway when Judd Anderson first approached me with what he'd found out. It would have put paid to my academic career, but it wouldn't have landed me in prison. Certain circumstances changed my mind. I killed him, and I'm not really sorry, but I'm not a violent person most of the time.

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So you saw me coming out of the classroom, Stephen? I didn't see you, but I was in a bit of a hurry."

"No, I didn't see you," Stephen said, "but I know you did it. You did your best to cover your tracks, but in a university, an institution with thousands of Web sites and a zillion gigabytes of electronic records yet still drowning in paper documenting every damn thing from the founding forward to the last tree planted, there's a record of every nasty transaction if you know where to look for it."

"A pretty speech and too true, up to a point. But I can't believe you found a record of this one. It doesn't matter, though. You *will* find it, or Detective Ortiz and his minions will, when I tell you where to look. Well, I guess it's time for my two o'clock lecture, and I'm damn well going to deliver it. Shall we put some chairs in a circle? Who was assigned to bring refreshments?"

"You might think that greed got the better of me, but that would be a gross oversimplification. To begin with, I was never overly enthusiastic about the whole Museum of Plagiarism idea. The university was pinching pennies, and my own research was underfunded. All my requests for travel money were routinely turned down. If I misled the committee, sold those books discreetly, and used the profits in the pursuit of knowledge, I would be committing a crime, surely, but I would be serving the greater good of scholarship. So that's just what I did. And a good bargain it was until Judd Anderson came along and started looking at financial records. The beginning of my downfall was that he had as little regard for the value of a Museum of Plagiarism as I did. It turned out that that letter, which when handed over to me looked like it had come fresh from the mailroom that day, had actually been photocopied by the dean's secretary, with a notation put in the file that I was taking care of it. Anderson, worse luck, knew the old man who was the potential donor, knew that he was a serious collector and not a crank as I had intimated to the committee. He followed the trail and divined what I had done.

"When he first confronted me, quietly, my immediate impulse was to own up, return as much of the money realized as I was able. I'm not a criminal, you see, and I'm certainly not a murderer, not really. But then Anderson made the mistake of telling me what he intended to do with the money when I repaid it. Nothing to support learning and scholarship. Not even to help fund the Museum of Plagiarism. He wanted to use it to renovate his own office, make a more luxurious and attractive venue to impress potential donors. He shouldn't have told me that. I was incensed. He called me for a meeting before the meeting of the Museum of Plagiarism committee, ostensibly to discuss in what manner my perfidy would be presented to the committee. He wanted a remote

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location where we wouldn't be seen or heard by anyone. I wonder what he had in mind. Blackmailing me, maybe? Anyway, he didn't know the campus, having spent all his short time here holed up with his files and piles of records between power lunches and receptions. So I had to give him directions to Barcroft Hall. Of course, I thought that falling-down old building would be empty. I didn't know your office was there, Stephen. I was waiting for him in B14, not necessarily intending to kill him but getting more and more angry as I waited. When he finally came through the door, I attacked Anderson with that absurd bronze baseball bat, not really knowing what I was doing. Something just came over me."

Probably a temporary-insanity plea, Vanessa thought.

"Stephen, if you didn't see me coming out of that classroom, how did you know it was me?"

"Anderson was looking for an elevator that wasn't there. Why would he be doing that? The killer gave him directions, and he misunderstood them. What did you tell him?"

"To enter Barcroft Hall and go to the left."

"But he didn't hear *left;* he heard *lift.* Having lived for some time in England, he was used to translating the British term 'lift' to its American equivalent, 'elevator.' Why did he think the killer directed him to the lift? It was your New Zealand accent that betrayed you, Geoff."

Geoff Black shook his head in sad resignation. "I'm not sorry I killed him. You think I was protecting my own skin. Well, yes, I was. But it's bigger than that, you see. Anderson was just another example of an introduced species. You don't bring in a new predator to solve your problems. It upsets the balance of nature. Universities don't need corporate sharks. We have enough home-grown sharks, and at least our sharks understand the waters they're swimming in, eh? Judd Anderson is just another possum by the roadside to me." ●

Celebrating Sherlock Holmes

The Baker Street Irregulars, the world's oldest Sherlockian organization, was founded in 1934, the same year its annual dinner to celebrate the birthday of Sherlock Holmes was instituted. *EQMM,* whose founding editor was an early BSI member, has been providing copies of its current issue to guests at the banquet for the past sixty-four years, since 1943.

Each of the issues we plan for the BSI gathering contains some Sherlockian features. This year our cover sports a photograph of the actor most closely identified with Holmes in film, and our monthly review column, The Jury Box, leads off with assessments of several present-day novels that feature the immortal detective. In addition, we present "Dear Dr. Watson," a new episode in the adventures of Steve Hockensmith's Amlingmeyer brothers, two Victorian cowboys who, like many BSI members, have memorized Doyle's writings, and take their inspiration directly from Holmes's famous methods.

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EPIPHANY

by Margaret Murphy

"You've got to hold my hand!" Trina's got her cross face on, because we're late and it's my fault, 'cos I didn't get ready fast enough. Her eyebrows are all bunched up and her eyes are squinty.

"No! You squeeze too hard!" I hide my hand behind my back, but she's ten and big and I'm only seven and little, so she wins.

"I don't want you—I want my mummy!"

"Well, your mummy doesn't want you."

This is so horrible, I gasp. "You're a big fat liar!"

Trina really is fat, so she gets even crosser. "Am not! Your mummy's a wacko."

"She is NOT." I try to hit her, but I've got my school bag in the other hand and it's too heavy, so I don't get a good swing.

Trina gives me a big tug and starts to sing, "Loony-bin, loony-tune, she's so mad she bays at the moon!"

"Stop it!" I shout. "It's not true. She's just op*pressed.*"

Trina laughs—it's that loud, hard laugh—when you know it means she doesn't think it's funny at all. "It's not *o*-ppressed, it's *de*pressed—muppet." She squeezes and squeezes until I cry.

"I'm in charge. And your mummy says you've got to hold my hand to cross the road," she says.

I don't see why, 'cos there's Pelican lights and everyone knows you just have to wait for the green man, but no matter how hard I wriggle, I can't make her let go. If you looked at her face you'd think she was smiling, but she isn't, she's showing her teeth, like Uncle Pete's dog does when he doesn't want you to stroke him.

A mummy comes up with her kids while we're waiting, so I cry harder and shout, "You're hurting my HAND!" The mummy looks

Formerly a teacher of biology, Margaret Murphy sold her first novel, *Goodnight, My Angel,* in 1996 and it was shortlisted for the First Blood Award for debut crime fiction. Since then she has seen the publication of six more novels, two of them in a series featuring the Liverpool CID, and available in the U.K. In the U.S. her nonseries novels *Darkness Falls* and *Weaving Shadows* are available from St. Martin's Press and Leisure Books.

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at Trina, and she lets go, but only a bit, so it doesn't hurt so much.

She smiles and pretends to be nice. "Don't be silly. You wouldn't want to get squished, now, would you?" Explaining like I'm a baby. She wipes my nose with her tissue, when I didn't even need her to and it's probably full of boogers, anyway.

She has to keep pretending, because the mummy walks behind us. They're late, too, but the mummy is kind to her children and tells them not to worry, to just tell the teacher the car wouldn't start. I look over my shoulder because I can't hear them talking anymore, and she's at the gate of the county primary, which isn't the same as our school.

She waves bye-bye and smiles, so they don't worry. Then she looks at me and I can tell she's thinking if I was her little girl she would walk me to school and she wouldn't squeeze my hand too hard.

"Come *on.*" Trina pulls so hard I nearly fall over and she has to squeeze my hand again or I'll fall. "Saved your life!" she says. "Now you owe me forever."

This makes me afraid, in case she makes me eat worms or something to pay her back, but something makes me say, "You nearly killed me, now you owe *me* forever."

She lets go of my hand 'cos we're on the field now, and the school is at the top of the hill, up the grey path. My fingers have gone white and stiff, so I tuck my hand under my arm.

"Baby." Trina walks fast deliberately so I have to run to keep up. My fingers are so cold. Trina walks faster and faster, and I'm afraid I'll get left behind and I won't know what to say to Miss Irvine. "My fingers hurt!" She pays no attention, but she's almost catched up to a lady with a dog, and I think about how she felt guilty in front of the mummy, and I shout, "You BROKE MY FINGERS!"

She stops, like a soldier when the sergeant calls halt. Then she turns and marches up to me and bends down, so her face is right in front of mine. Her cheeks are red, but everything else is white, 'cept her nose. "You're such a brat!" Her eyes are big and angry.

"I'm not! I'm not a brat, it's just my hand hurts and my fingers are cold."

"I told you. You should've worn your gloves," she says, and grabs my hand. I try to escape, but I'm too slow 'cos I'm upset. "Hm," she says, examining it like a doctor. "I see. . . . Stone cold. That's frostbite, that is. I'm afraid those fingers'll drop off by playtime."

I snatch my hand back, pushing it into my coat pocket.

"One by one," Trina says. "Snap! Snap! Snap! Till all you've got is stumps and you won't be able to write or eat or dress or anything and they'll put you in a home."

I start to cry again and she gets behind me and gives me a big shove. "Crybaby! Get a move on, or I'll snap one off right this minute!"

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I feel all fluttery, like when Mummy and Daddy used to argue. "Please don't!"

Trina makes another grab for my hand, but I run onto the grass.

"Snap! Snap! Snap!" she says. I back away and she hunches over like a big bear that would eat you. "Snap! Snap! Snap!"

I turn and run. I run and run and Trina can't catch me, because she might be able to walk fast, but she's too fat to run.

"You can't go off on your own!" she shouts. "You're not a-*loud!*"

I run until I can't even hear her shouting anymore. When I turn around, I can't see Trina. My footsteps have made a track—pale green shoeprints on the white frosty grass. I run around in circles for a bit, in case she tries to follow me, and I end up in the trees. *Can't go in there on your own, you're not aloud.*

I'm not aloud 'cos there might be Bad Men, waiting to pounce. But I can be quiet as a whisper. I've had lots of practice, 'cos Mummy needs me to be quiet when she has a headache. My mummy is sick and she gets headaches a lot.

Like a steel band around my head! Like someone's hammering nails in my skull!

Steel bands make a lot of noise—I know 'cos they had one at the harvest festival and they're VERY aloud, so no wonder they give you a headache.

The path is glittery and some of the twigs and stones are white, like a tiny bit of snow is on them. I hear a noise. It might be a lion or a wolf or a Bad Man. But if I tiptoe very softly and don't look, it'll be okay. Only I don't feel okay, 'cos my heart feels very big and it's bashing my chest so hard I can see it through my jacket. I'm wearing my new one that I got for Christmas, with the fur trim, so I really hope it isn't a wolf, in case he thinks I'm a nice juicy deer to eat.

I look in front and behind and on the left and on the right, but there's nobody, 'cos me and Trina was already late and all the kids are in school and all the mummies and daddies are at home or in work. I cross my fingers and hold my breath and walk very quiet and pray to God that the wolf won't eat me.

The sound comes again, and I jump. It doesn't sound like a wolf, it sounds like a cat's miaow. What if a kitten has got lost and can't find her mummy? I take a big deep breath and hold it again, only this time, it's so I can listen. There it is!

The miaow is coming from under a bush quite near the end of the path where there's a gate onto the street, so maybe the kitten just wandered off.

"Here, kitty, kitty, kitty." The kitten doesn't come out, so I kneel next to the bush. It isn't very muddy and I don't get dirty at all, because anyway it's all frozen. "*Here,* kitty."

It's all wrapped up in a yellow blanket. The blanket moves and

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I'm a bit scared in case the kitten scratches me. But there's nobody else to rescue it, so I take one corner, where the silky bit is, and lift it very carefully.

"Oh!" It isn't a kitten at all—it's a baby. I look around, but there's no mummies about who might have dropped it—and anyway, you don't just drop a baby and not know about it. Then I remember Mummy said when you have a baby you have to go out and find him. And the most popular place is under a bush.

It's *my* baby . . . For a minute, I just kneel there, smiling because I'm so happy. Its cheeks are pink, but its lips are a funny colour. It isn't miaowing, it's crying, but very softly. Maybe that's 'cos it's not aloud, like I'm not aloud when Mummy's feeling Bad, *Or you'll get a SMACK and locked in your room, my girl!*

"Miaow," it goes.

I pick it up. It's bigger than my Baby Suzy doll, and much heavier. Heavy and squirmy, but I'm quite strong for my age, and once you get the hang of it, babies are easy. I go the back way, so nobody sees me. The baby gets warmer from the exercise and doesn't look so funny anymore. Its lips are normal lip colour, and it just stares at me, like it knows I'm its mummy.

I take it to the shed and cuddle it for a bit. If Mummy looks out, she won't see me, 'cos I'm too far away at the bottom of the garden and Trina won't tell them I ran away, 'cos if she does I'll tell them she was going to snap my fingers off and she'll be in Big Trouble.

There's three reasons why a baby cries: if it's hungry, if it's sick, or if its nappy needs changing. —Oh, and if it's tired, but mostly they just go to sleep if they're tired.

My baby needed its nappy changed. I have to find a clean nappy, which is easy, 'cos my mummy put all the baby things in the shed after she lost her baby. I don't mind changing its nappy, 'cos I can hold my breath for ages and anyway, Mummy showed me how to change Joseph's nappy, before he got lost. My baby's a boy as well—I would have liked a girl better, but a boy is almost as good.

The nappy's cold and the baby cries a bit until I put a vest on him, and a fluffy suit that has feet in it like little bootees, and a hood so he's warm and toasty.

"Hush little baby, don't say a word, Papa's gonna buy you a mock-in bird."

My daddy used to sing that to me when he lived with us. He doesn't live in my house anymore—he lives in an apartment, because Mummy and Daddy need some time apart. When Daddy comes, they don't look at each other, like they're not friends anymore. Mummy always cries when he's gone, though, so I know she wants to be friends again.

And now the baby's crying again—not miaowing anymore—he goes "Wah!" quite loud. I think he must be hungry. Babies drink special milk, only out of a tin, instead of a bottle. You've got to mix

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it up with hot water and put it in a bottle with a teat on it. I tried it once, before Joseph got lost, and it's disgusting, but babies like it. There's some in the baby box, only I'm frightened of going inside the house for the hot water, 'cos Mummy's having a Bad Day, and I'm not supposed to be home yet.

"Shush, Baby. You'll just have to wait." But he won't wait. He goes "WAH!" even louder.

If my baby was like the Baby Jesus, he wouldn't cry. For a minute, I think what if it *is* the Baby Jesus, 'cos it's Christmas, and the Wise Men are supposed to come today, and I found him all on his own, like a miracle.

But Mummy says all babies are miracles, and anyway, there wasn't any Star of Bethlehem, with it being in the daytime, and there wasn't any shepherds as well. Also, the Baby Jesus was born in a manger, which is like a stable, only with cows and sheep, and my baby was under a bush, like a normal baby.

"Wa-aah!" And Baby Jesus was a good baby.

"Now, you're just being naughty!"

It makes no difference, he goes, "Wah! Wa-aah!" until I'm fed up of it and take the milk stuff and close the shed door, so no one will hear. The kids next-door have got a swing, but there's nobody on it, so it mustn't be lunchtime yet. They always come home for lunch and they always get to play on the swing. It isn't fair. But today it's covered in frost, so they mustn't be home yet, and I look up into the sky and cross my fingers and make a prayer there's enough in the clouds to make it snow.

The back door is open, so Mummy must be in. I leave the door wide, so I can sneak out if I hear her coming downstairs. The tin is open from last time Joseph had some. I put the bottle on the table and take off the lid. You have to put the powder in with a special spoon called a scoop. Then you add boiled water. Mummy won't let me use the kettle, so I use hot water from the tap, instead. Then I put the lid on and shake and shake and SHAKE!

Mummy must be asleep, 'cos she doesn't hear me. Sometimes, she sleeps all day when she's Bad. Being Bad isn't the same as being naughty. Being Bad is when you're sick and it makes you cry all the time and you don't want to make a costume for the school play about Baby Jesus. And *This isn't all about you, you know! This whole bloody world doesn't revolve around you!* Miss Irvine said it didn't matter and gave me an old one from the box under the stage but it smelt of cobwebs and Trina said she didn't know angels were stinky. Trina's horrible.

I'm *starving* because I didn't have time for breakfast, and anyway there wasn't any milk. There's peanut butter in the cupboard so I push the dirty dishes out of the way and make two sandwiches, with peanut butter on both of them. Then I stick my finger in the jar and have a bit extra, 'cos nobody's looking.

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There's nothing on TV, so I put a DVD on instead and watch *Shrek* for a bit. I have to cover my mouth so I don't laugh too loud and wake Mummy up. Daddy says Mummy's like an ogre when she's got her angry head on. Only she isn't funny, like Shrek, and she isn't green. I don't like Mummy's angry head.

I hear a *flump.* It's coming from upstairs, and I think it might be Mummy. I switch off the TV and run to the door. If you open it a tiny tiny bit, you can see out with one eye. The toilet flushes, but Mummy doesn't come downstairs.

I know where the floor creaks, so I can get down the hall quieter than a mouse with slippers on. The baby's bottle isn't hot anymore, but maybe it won't mind. Because it's my baby, I'm the only one that can give it a name, but the only name that keeps coming into my head is Joseph. I frown and frown like Mummy, to stop it coming back. Maybe that's why Mummy frowns—to keep her baby's name out of her head?

I have to run to the shed and hope Mummy isn't watching. She isn't, because I count to fifty and she still doesn't come. The baby is very, very quiet.

"Good boy! Look what Mummy's brought you." I cuddle it while I give it the bottle. It sucks and sucks and sucks until all the milk is gone, then suddenly, *bleurgh!* It's sick everywhere.

"Naughty boy!" I have to get a wet wipe and clean his face and his fluffy suit, but it still smells of sick and he starts to cry.

"Wah! Wah!" Looking after babies is HARD.

Mummy should be glad she doesn't have to look after Joseph. It's his own fault if he got lost, 'cos you should always hold your mummy's hand if you don't know how to get back.

"I'm going to count to five. If you don't stop crying I'll give you a SMACK!" Mummy says smacking is a—*something*—of failure. I forget what. But she hasn't got Joseph going "Wah! Wa-aah! Wah!" And he won't stop.

"Laura?"

My heart stops. Then it starts again, really fast, like it's trying to catch up. I cover the baby's mouth but it's all wet and snotty and anyway it doesn't stop.

"Laura!"

I come out of the shed and close the door. The baby goes "Wa-aah!" So I run halfway across the lawn. Maybe she won't hear.

"Are you home already?" she says.

"You forgot my dinner money." This is true, but Mummy looks at me like I'm trying to hide something behind my back. "I had to come home," I say, which is also true, but not in the same way.

She blinks, like she's just woken up. "Come in, you'll catch your death of cold."

"Can't I play out?" I can hear the baby *"Wah! Wa-aah!"* but it sounds far away.

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"You haven't even got your gloves on! Can't you do the simplest thing?"

I don't say anything, 'cos it just makes her more cross.

"Did Trina walk you home?"

I nod, because I always give myself away if I tell a fib.

She doesn't say anything for a while, and I'm afraid she's listening for the baby. But then she turns away from me. "Inside," she says.

I want a cup of cocoa with marshmallows, but Mummy goes straight back upstairs. Maybe I can make some using hot water out of the tap. But I can't find a clean cup and the cocoa is in one of the wall cupboards, but I push a stool over and climb up.

BANG!

At first I think Mummy's fallen over, but then I hear her running down the stairs. Really running. Thud, thud, thud, thud! She pushes the kitchen door so hard it crashes against the wall and the door wobbles and the wall gets a dent in it. I'm so frightened, I just stand on the stool and I can't move.

"You bloody little liar!"

"Mummy . . ."

"It's eleven o'clock in the morning. What the *hell* are you doing home?" My mouth is dry and my legs are so shaky I can't even jump down off the stool. "Your clock must've stopped," I say. "It really is—"

Suddenly, my face is burning. I lose my balance, but she grabs me by the arm and pulls me down. "Ow! Ow, it hurts! Mummy, please, it hurts!"

"How dare you lie to me—I just heard it on the radio, you wicked, wicked girl!" Whack! Whack! She smacks me as hard as she can on my bum and my legs and my back.

"Mummy, *please!*"

Then she pulls me upstairs and it hurts so much 'cos she's twisting my arm, but when I try to tell her she whacks me again.

"Bloody liar!"

She throws me onto my bed. There's toys on it, because I was playing with them before school. I land on them and they dig into my back. "Ow! Mummy!"

"Look at this pigsty! How can you find anything in this pile of filth? You dirty, dirty girl. No wonder you've no friends—you make me ashamed!"

"Mummy! I'm sorry!" I can hardly talk because I'm crying so hard. "I—Trina hurt my hand. I had to run away 'cos she was going to break my fingers off!"

"Stop lying! I've had ENOUGH!" She's screaming so loud I cover my ears, but I can still hear her. "Enough of you. Enough of your lies and your whining, your complaints and demands. You're never satisfied, are you? ARE you?"

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"Yes, Mummy."

She slaps my legs. "Don't be insolent! What am I going to say to Miss Irvine? That you lied? That you ran away?"

"Please, Mummy, don't. Don't tell Miss Irvine!" I'm sobbing, and Mummy hates that, but I can't stop. It's like somebody poured all the sadness in the world into my heart, and my heart is so full it's spilled into my tummy, and I have to cry or I'll burst.

Mummy comes up close. Her eyes aren't like my mummy's eyes. They're hard and glittery and I'm afraid to look. "SHUT UP!" she screams and slaps me across the face again.

I close my eyes and hold my breath. I hold it and hold it to stop myself from crying, and after a long time, she goes away.

Mission. Mummy says smacking is *a mission* of failure.

When she's gone I cry for a long time, but very, very quietly—'cos crying's not aloud. I crawl under the duvet and curl up and pretend I'm a dormouse and I'm going asleep till the winter's over. I'm awfully tired . . .

"Sweetie?"

I lie still under the duvet. Maybe she won't notice me. Then I feel her hand on my shoulder, and I make a little sound, which I didn't mean to make, but I couldn't help it. "Laura—sweetie—it's all right. Mummy isn't cross anymore." I don't say anything, in case it's a trick.

"Mummy's very sorry." I still don't say anything. "Look, I've brought you a surprise." She lifts the duvet a tiny bit to let the smell in. Scrambled eggs on toast. My favourite.

I slide out from under the covers, but I don't sit close to her. I go and sit on my pillows, instead, so I can look at her. She hasn't got her angry head on anymore. She looks sad and her eyes are red, like *she's* been crying.

"Oh, sweetie!" she leans over and at first I'm afraid, and I duck.

"Shhh . . ." she says. She was only going to stroke my head this time. I'm all sweaty, 'cos I've still got my coat on, but Mummy doesn't shout or be mad at me. "Mummy doesn't mean to be cross," she says. And now she's definitely crying, which makes me want to start all over again.

"Won't you have something to eat?" she says. It does smell lovely. She's brought it up on a tray, like when I'm sick. I feel like telling her no, but I'm *so* hungry. It's already nighttime, so I must have fallen asleep.

I nod, to show I'll try. It hurts my face, but you don't have to chew scrambled eggs, and the toast is soggy—the way I like it—so it's not too bad. She helps me to take my coat off, and looks at my arms and cries again. Then she sits next to me, and I can see that she really isn't cross anymore and she really is sorry.

"You can have hot chocolate with extra marshmallows and two

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chocolate biscuits after," she says, and kisses me very soft on the forehead, and I love her more than the whole wide world. "I'm sorry, Mummy," I say, and I can't help crying. My lips wobble and I feel like I've got something stuck in my throat, but I haven't. "I didn't mean to upset you."

"It's not your fault," she says. "I shouldn't have—oh, *darling,* I didn't mean it, you know that, don't you? It's just, since Joseph . . ." She never says the next bit. *Since Joseph got lost. Since I lost Joseph.* Maybe she blames herself for losing him. 'Cos Uncle Pete says you've got to watch kids like a hawk.

Mummy's fast asleep. It's still nighttime, but my watch says it's only eight o'clock, which isn't even my bedtime. I tiptoe down the stairs to the kitchen. I have to go out to the shed, so I'll need a torch—there's one under the kitchen sink. I've got an idea—see, the baby is mine, 'cos I found him fair and square. He *is* big, though. And heavy. And *smelly.* And he cries all the time. I can hear him ("Wah! Wah!") very faintly, as I walk across the grass. And Mummy really likes changing nappies and bath time and all that stuff. I could share him a bit—Mummy says nice little girls share their things—and I wouldn't mind, so long as I get to cuddle him and dress him sometimes. And maybe take him for walks. I haven't even given him a proper name yet—just "Baby," so I could call him whatever I like. It's a good idea, and I giggle when I think what a surprise Mummy will get.

I open the door and: "WAH! WAH!" Baby will have to stop crying, or he'll spoil everything.

"Baby, you HAVE to stop!" I say. But of course he doesn't. I find a dummy in the baby box, but he spits it out. He smells of sick and dirty nappies. "Baby, *please.*" But that does no good. I take his dirty clothes off and give him a new nappy and everything, but he STILL won't stop.

"Now just you stop it! You wicked, selfish boy! You're never satisfied—you always want more more more! Stop it. Stop it RIGHT NOW!"

But he screams even louder.

"I've had ENOUGH!"

Mummy's still asleep when I go back to my room.

"Look, Mummy, I brought you a surprise." She stretches and sighs but she doesn't open her eyes. Joseph looks lovely in his clean rompers and bootees. He seems heavier than before. Maybe I'll just put him next to Mummy so she can see him when she wakes up properly. He's nice and quiet now. And with all that crying, he could do with the rest. ●

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Art by Laurie Harden

GARBO WRITES

by Loren D. Estleman

"I want to be alone," Harriet said.

"Vant," Valentino corrected, emphasizing the *V.* "It's 'I *vant* to be alone.' Your accent needs work."

"No, I mean I really want to be alone. My bra came unhooked."

He'd misinterpreted her fidgeting under the off-the-shoulder velvet gown as a seductive dance, in keeping with the dress and the bejeweled contraption on her head, a reproduction of an outfit Greta Garbo had worn in *Mata Hari.*

"I think the ladies' room is behind that column." He pointed.

She excused herself and went that way, leaving him alone among two or three dozen women dressed as Garbo in her various movie roles: disguised as a not-very-convincing young man in boots and jerkin from *Queen Christina;* hauntingly amnesiac in platinum-blond hair and elegant evening dress from *As You Desire Me;* gung-ho Stalinist in severe suit and cloche hat from *Ninotchka.* He counted no fewer than five Anna Christies and as many Mata Haris, although none as bewitching as Harriet Johansen wearing that outfit. She bore an amazing resemblance to her inspiration, a fact Valentino hadn't noted until she'd revealed herself in costume.

There were fat Garbos, old Garbos, black Garbos, an Asian Garbo,

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and one or two Garbos wearing powder over what looked like five-o'clock shadows. Among the escorts was one very good Erich von Stroheim, several John Gilberts, and three Charles Boyers attempting to look Napoleonic in *Conquest.* Valentino himself wore an imperial Russian uniform and a thin Ramon Novarro moustache, cemented with spirit gum to his upper lip. He'd have preferred to go as John Barrymore, but that would have been the wrong movie.

Loren Estleman's new story was inspired, he tells us, "by a real-life event: the possible theft of several Garbo letters from the Swedish Military Archives. They were reported missing in late 2005, just as the international community was observing the 100th anniversary of Garbo's birth." Don't miss Mr. Estleman's new Amos Walker novel *American Detective* (Forge). †

The fancy-dress couples drifted to and fro across the ballroom of the great Beverly Hills mansion, sipping from glass flutes and spilling champagne on the glittering parquet floor. The walls and columns were ornamented in a relentless Art Deco motif, with original and reproduced posters from Garbo's most famous films and glossy black-and-white stills of that iconic face blown up ten times life size among the clamshells and stylized swans. The party had been convened to celebrate the 100th anniversary of the star's birth.

"Let me guess," said a familiar voice. "Lieutenant Alexis Rosanoff."

Valentino turned to shake hands with the host. Matthew Rankin was a trim, erect eighty in a beautifully cut tuxedo with flared 1930s lapels, white shirt, tie, and hair all of a piece and interrupted only by his aristocratic face with its carefully topped-off tan. He might have been an older version of the Melvyn Douglas who had played opposite Garbo three times.

"Right on the nose," Valentino said. "I doubt three people in this room can match the filmography you carry around in your head."

"I've Andrea to thank for that. She was a fan of Greta's for years before they were friends. They died the same day, you know."

His guest nodded sympathetically. Fifteen years had planed away only a little pain from Rankin's tone. "Did you know Garbo well?"

"I never met her. She and Andrea went back to before we were married. They'd visit whenever Andrea made a buying trip to New York, but after Andrea retired, they kept in contact through the mail. She burned the letters at Greta's request, not long before Greta died. Some of her other so-called friends had begun to sell her letters at auction."

"Mrs. Rankin was a real friend. The people in charge of the Swedish Military Archives are offering a large reward for the return of several stolen Garbo letters."

"As it happened, I'd just returned from Stockholm when the story broke. I attended a reception for a researcher friend who was

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sharing the Nobel Prize with another fellow. People will steal anything these days. They aren't content just to hound living celebrities into armed compounds to protect their privacy; now they've begun to prey on the dead ones as well."

Rankin's bitterness seemed justified. A former chemist with a hefty respect for technology, he'd computerized his late father-in-law's department-store chain and built new stores in Europe, Japan, and Australia. His highly visible executive presence, often accompanied by his equally aristocratic wife, had made them public figures, with all the unwelcome press attention that entailed. Since Andrea's death, Rankin had retreated into virtual seclusion, emerging only for such events as this, in respect to her friendship with Garbo and his keen interest in classic films in general.

Valentino had benefited from the latter. As an archivist with the UCLA Film Preservation Department, he'd been pleased to accept generous donations from Rankin to update equipment and purchase rare prints of motion pictures long considered lost. He'd accepted with alacrity the invitation to attend the Garbo party with a guest.

His motives weren't entirely social. Somewhat disingenuously—for he knew the answer, from rumors—he asked his host how Garbo and his late wife had come to be friends. The anger evaporated from Rankin's face. "They met in one of Andrea's father's stores," he said. "My dear girl was working there to prepare herself for an executive position. Greta was a salesgirl, you know, in Sweden; made her debut, in fact, in a promotional film for the store, *How Not to Dress.*"

"That footage has been missing for many years," Valentino prompted.

"Your avarice is showing, young man. I'm sure you've heard the story that Greta made her a present of her own print, one former department-store clerk to another. It wouldn't have offended me if you'd come out and asked if I still have it."

"I'm sorry. My cards say *Film Detective;* 'Archivist' makes people's eyes glaze over and they don't hear my pitch. Sometimes I get to believing my own publicity and try to be slick. I won't bother you about it again." His face felt hot with shame.

Rankin laughed boomingly, drawing curious glances from some of his milling guests. "I was paraphrasing Andrea's father. If I'd asked him directly for her hand, he'd have had me thrown out of his house as a golddigger. I've waited fifty years to turn someone on the spit the way he did me that day, just before he agreed. UCLA's in my will. You'll have those reels by and by."

"Thank you, Mr. Rankin. You don't know what that means."

"A second disc on the DVD re-release of *Flesh and the Devil,* probably, and a lot of hyperventilating on the part of a select group of cinema geeks. These days, old movies and department stores suffer from the same apathy on the part of mall rats and Adam Sandler fans. Call Roger. He'll arrange a screening."

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"I'd like that very much."

"It's been stored under ideal conditions. I think you'll be pleased." Suddenly Rankin's face went white beneath the tan. "Good Lord!"

Valentino turned, following the direction of his gaze. Harriet was approaching. The legendary head shot of Garbo, full face, in the identical Mata Hari headdress hung on the wall behind her and she seemed to be coming straight out of the frame. All at once she stopped, her plucked brows rising. When Valentino turned back, Rankin was no longer standing before him. He lay on the floor, pale and unconscious, with a crowd beginning to gather around him.

The doctor, dressed as John Barrymore in double-breasted *Grand Hotel* blazer with a coat of arms on the handkerchief pocket, was summoned into Rankin's study, where Valentino and another male volunteer had carried the tycoon and stretched him out on a leather sofa. The patient had come to, but the doctor had insisted on listening to his heart.

He smiled, removing the stethoscope from his ears. "Just a faint, I'd say. You might try a looser collar next time you play dress-up." His trim moustache, unlike Valentino's, was genuine, but appeared to have been retraced with an eyebrow pencil much darker than his thinning hair. His wife, whom Valentino had seen with him in the ballroom, had looked big-boned and awkward in a ballerina's frilly tutu—although no more so than Garbo in that film. Fortunately, she'd worn more becoming outfits in most of her scenes.

"It wasn't the collar." Rankin looked at Valentino. "Who was that woman? I thought it was the guest of honor back from the grave."

"Harriet Johansen, my date. She doesn't look that way most of the time. She's a criminal expert with the LAPD. I'm sorry she gave you a start."

"Make sure she's still here when we give out the prize for Best Garbo Look-Alike. Phyllis won't mind, will she, Ned? I'd hate to lose my personal physician over a social gaffe."

"She has a sense of humor. I told her she looked like one of those dancing hippos in *Fantasia*. She didn't hit me where it shows." The doctor snapped shut his bag and rose from the sofa. "Just to be sure, why not schedule an appointment? We won't have nearly as much fun dressing up for your funeral."

Rankin assured him he would. At the door, the doctor made room for Roger Akers, Rankin's personal assistant, to enter. He was a lean, high-shouldered, narrow-faced man of forty, a high-strung, nervous type whom Valentino had dealt with often in his relations with his employer, and for whom he'd formed an instant dislike. There was something of Uriah Heep in his demeanor. He wasn't in costume. Valentino had not seen him at the party.

"I came as soon as I heard," Akers said.

"I'm sure you did. Did you finish those letters?" The older man

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sat up and buttoned his shirt.

"Of course not. They said you'd collapsed."

"Well, I didn't die, so you're still employed. Help yourself to a drink, since you're here, but I expect those letters here on my desk in the morning."

"Have I ever failed?"

"You've never been one to overlook a detail—or an opportunity. Now, please leave. I've something to discuss with Valentino."

Spots of color the size of quarters glowed high on Akers' otherwise sallow cheeks, but he turned and left without comment.

"That was fairly unpleasant," Valentino said.

Rankin stood and refastened his tie before an antique mirror. "His concern was real. If I die, that man will have to live on an assistant's salary."

"If you dislike him so much, why do you keep him on?"

Thirties dance music drifted in from outside while Rankin fussed with the tie. "Your stunning date," he said. "Did you say she's a police officer?"

"Not technically. She's a criminalist. She collects and analyzes evidence, but she doesn't arrest or interrogate people or carry a badge or a gun, like on TV."

"Nevertheless I assume she's required to report unlawful activity. Can you come back tomorrow morning, without her, and without telling her we're meeting? I don't want to put you in a position of having to duck awkward questions."

Valentino hesitated. "Something tells me this has nothing to do with my job responsibilities."

"It can, if you agree to my terms. You pose as a detective, which suggests you have a talent for investigation. I know you've been instrumental in bringing many lost films to light. How would you like to exercise your gift and incidentally add Greta Garbo's first appearance on screen to that list? Immediately, I mean. Not after I expire and my will crawls through probate."

"I like the part about getting *How Not to Dress* for UCLA. The other part sounds illegal."

"I want you to dig up something on Roger Akers. Something embarrassing, and preferably intimidating."

"That *is* illegal."

"Only if you break the law to obtain it. What I do with it isn't your concern."

"It is if you're considering some kind of blackmail. That makes me an accomplice."

"There was only one blackmailer in this room, and he's left. I want to use the information to stop him before he cleans me out."

Valentino had no intention of investigating anyone's sordid past, but he had a movie buff's desire to see what happened next.

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Matthew Rankin, the wily old CEO, had sensed that, and refused to elaborate that evening. His guest agreed to the appointment, but rebelled against the terms by telling Harriet they were meeting in the morning.

They were at her door. She lowered her Best Garbo Look-Alike prize from her face—a nearly priceless period majolica vase fashioned into a full-length likeness of the actress—and fixed him with her Mata Hari-like gaze, primed to wring secrets from the unwary male gender. "If he wants to adopt you as his heir, don't let him. Department stores went out with miniskirts."

"He's kept his going a decade longer than most. Anyway, my birth parents might object."

"Why are you being so mysterious? Remember, you're talking to a police specialist."

Already he'd begun to regret taking her that far into his confidence. "You know I've been obsessed with that earliest Garbo footage for years. He's invited me to a screening." Which wasn't a lie.

"Not an answer. It's no mystery you love movies more than people."

"Not in every case." He kissed her. "Where are you going to put your prize?"

"You'll find out the next time you try to change the subject."

"I'm sworn to secrecy."

"About a screening? What is it, a skin flick?"

"A porno film starring Greta Garbo would be the find of the century, but I'd never show it in public for the same reasons I'm not going to betray Mr. Rankin's confidence. Some things should be kept private."

She didn't pry him any more for information. She also didn't let him kiss her again. He stared at the door she'd closed in his face, feeling a little like John Gilbert must have when Garbo left him at the altar in real life.

Matthew Rankin's mansion wore a grim aspect under a heavy slice of morning smog. Valentino, shorn of false moustache and dressed for work in the California uniform of sport coat, T-shirt, jeans, and running shoes, let the housekeeper lead him to a front parlor to wait while she went to see if her master would receive him. He was contemplating an oil portrait of Garbo in late life—a gift, no doubt, to her friend Andrea Rankin—when a door slammed at the other end of the house.

The noise was followed by a chandelier-rattling scream; and Valentino knew that was no door he'd heard.

The shortest route to Rankin's study led through the ballroom, where a team of invisible servants had removed all traces of the party that had taken place only a few hours before. He pushed past the housekeeper, frozen inside the open door with her hands covering her face, and put on the brakes just in time to avoid trip-

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ping over Roger Akers.

Rankin's assistant lay on his back, spread-eagled, as if he'd been knocked flat by a sudden gale. The front of his suit coat was stained dark, and a stain of the same color was spreading around him on the valuable Persian rug.

"Is he dead?"

Valentino looked at the speaker. Matthew Rankin stood on the other side of the great carved desk where he conducted business. The squat revolver smoking in his right hand clashed with his conservative gray suit.

Rankin didn't wait for the answer to his question. "He was a madman. He came at me with that." He pointed.

A marble bust lay on the rug inches from Akers' right hand. It appeared to be a naturalistic rendering of Garbo at the height of her beauty. The wooden pedestal it had occupied stood empty nearby.

The housekeeper raised her head from her hands. Her expression was distorted but she appeared to be regaining composure. When Valentino told her to call the police, she nodded and withdrew, closing the door behind her as from habit.

Rankin looked down, seemed to realize for the first time he was holding a gun, and dropped it on his desk. He sank into his chair. "He wanted more money than I'd been paying him to keep quiet. When I refused, he went into a rage. I've kept this gun in the drawer for years, for my protection. I don't even remember picking it up. He had that bust raised above his head and I knew he meant to split open my skull with it."

As Rankin spoke, Valentino felt Akers' wrist. There was no pulse. Anger or surprise twisted the dead man's face. "It will have to come out now," Valentino said. "What was he blackmailing you over?"

The top drawer was open; presumably, it was the one that had held the revolver. A befuddled-looking Rankin rummaged through its contents and laid a sheet on the desk. With a shudder, Valentino stepped away from the corpse and picked up the sheet.

It was a handwritten letter reproduced on common copy paper. There was no signature, and the text was written in a foreign language he identified as Swedish. "*Liebe* Andrea," read the greeting.

"A friend of mine paid a lot of money at auction for a rare Garbo autograph," Valentino said. "It looks like her writing. Did she write this to your wife?"

"Can you read it?"

"A word here and there, from my high school German, which is close. It appears to be a very tender letter."

"Andrea's mother was Swedish. They spoke in that language when they didn't want anyone eavesdropping; it was another bond between Andrea and Greta. I picked up a little over the years, by osmosis." He drew a deep breath and let it out in a rattle. "It's a love letter."

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"Did they have a sexual relationship?"

"Not that I ever knew, but the letter's explicit. Aren't you shocked?"

"Lesbian rumors followed Garbo her whole life. Even her best biographers haven't been able to track down any hard evidence. How did Akers get hold of this?"

"Snooping, how else? He must have found it somewhere in the house. It must have meant a lot to Andrea or she'd have burned it with the others. He gave me this copy: a souvenir, he said. I assume the original's in a safe place."

"We're enlightened these days. It wouldn't be that big a scandal."

"It would be to me. My wife was a very private woman, much like Greta. I'm betraying her memory just by showing you the letter." He sat up straight. "Give it back. I'm going to destroy it."

"If you do, you may stand trial for murder. It's hard to make a case for self-defense without establishing a motive on the part of the deceased."

Rankin's expression was stony; his earlier confusion had evaporated. He scooped up the revolver and pointed it at Valentino. "Give it back, I said."

"It won't do any good. The police are bound to find the original when they go through Akers' things."

The stone cracked. Rankin laid the gun on the desk and lowered his face into his hands. As the first siren came into earshot, Valentino nudged the weapon out of Rankin's reach.

"It's Swedish, all right," Harriet Johansen said. "Would you like a translation? My father was proud of his homeland. He made sure we all knew the language."

They were seated in the break room outside the forensics laboratory at Los Angeles police headquarters. He'd come there straight from Beverly Hills, where he'd given his statement to local detectives. He'd been looking forward to a social visit, to take his mind off the death scene and the picture of Matthew Rankin being taken away in a squad car. "Since when does your jurisdiction extend beyond the city limits?" he asked.

"We've got the best facilities in the State of California. It's a reciprocal thing: L.A. goes to Beverly Hills when we want to know what wine to serve with the veal at the commissioner's banquet." She took a folded sheet out of a pocket of her smock and spread it out on the table. He recognized the Garbo letter. A glop of mayonnaise fell from her tuna sandwich onto the text, smearing the ink when she brushed at it.

"What kind of way is that to treat evidence?"

"Relax. We ran off a half-dozen copies from the fax they sent us. This is a recap of a liaison Mrs. Rankin had with Garbo in New York in nineteen forty-nine. Pretty steamy stuff. You want it grope-by-grope or just a summary?"

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"Neither. If the handwriting checks out, it backs up Rankin's story and answers a question gossips have been asking for decades. I'm relieved for him, but it would be nice if just one star were left to shine untarnished in the firmament."

"You sound like a homophobe."

"If I were, I'd have to be a masochist, too, to live in this town. These days a person's sexuality isn't supposed to matter, but of course it does, or the columnists and talk-show hosts wouldn't whisper and giggle so much whenever someone famous gets outed. I like my *Titanics* unraised, my Jack the Rippers unidentified, and my Garbos mysterious."

"But not your shootings."

"I've got a personal stake in this one. If Rankin goes to prison, my department won't get its hands on *How Not to Dress* until he dies and his heirs finish fighting over the will." He told her then the reason for his meeting with Rankin.

She regarded him in silence for a moment. Without the exotic headdress to cover her short ash-blond hair she looked less like Garbo, but shared her sphinxlike expression. "If you'd told me he was being blackmailed, Akers might still be alive and in police custody."

"I promised I wouldn't."

"Don't pull that noble act on me. You had your eyes on that film, and you were willing to help blackmail a blackmailer to get it."

"Guilty, but only of the first charge. I thought if I knew the details I might be able to suggest a better solution. And I'm prejudiced in Rankin's favor. His wife died of a sudden heart attack just when they were planning retirement together. Then the bottom fell out of the department-store business, but instead of bailing out he invested his personal funds to drag the chain into the computer age at a time when most industries were still looking askance at it. His was one of the first businesses to sell merchandise online. Then he used some of the profits from the turnaround to help the film-preservation program. I'd have offered to help even without the added inducement."

"You're still not out of the woods, buddy. But I suppose I'll forgive you, if you promise not to make a habit of keeping secrets."

"I do, from you." He smiled.

She finished her sandwich. "The fingerprint people in Beverly Hills are pretty good. They matched some prints on the bust to the victim, so that part of Rankin's story checks out."

"If your graphologist confirms that letter was written by Garbo, he should be released."

"I spoke to him just before you came. He Googled her and hit paydirt in Stockholm. The Swedish Military Archives has the most extensive collection of her letters in the world. They're faxing samples for comparison, but our guy already has his doubts."

"How can he, without the samples in hand?"

She swiveled the paper on the table and slid it toward him.

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"Anything about this strike you as odd?"

He frowned at it, then shook his head. "I'm no expert, except where her films are concerned, and I don't know enough Swedish to order from a smorgasbord."

"You don't order from a smorgasbord; you help yourself. People are imperfect creatures. They seldom write a character in cursive the same way twice. The shape and slant vary, and so does the thickness of the line. But look at this." She used a coffee stir-stick as a pointer. "All these *s*'s are identical. Same goes for the *t*'s and *y*'s and the rest of the alphabet. Even the commas are the same, and don't get me started on the umlauts."

"By all means, let's not discuss the umlauts." He took a closer look. "It's obvious, when you point it out. I'm impressed. I knew you had a good eye, but—"

"Stop trying to butter me up. I'm still mad at you. It was the graphologist who noticed it. One of our computer nerds came up with the explanation. Did you know it's possible to create your own font, even from something as personal as handwriting? All you have to do is scan it in, and if you're handy with a mouse you can sculpt the alphabet in upper- and lowercase and all the punctuation, type it up, and print it out."

"Akers was Rankin's assistant. He must've spent a lot of time at the computer, typing letters and running errands. Experience is a great teacher." Valentino bit his lip—the only thing he ever bit into in that room. It was too close to where autopsies were conducted to trust the menu. "But anyone can see the difference between a printout and the real thing. A pen makes an uneven texture you can feel with your fingers."

"All Rankin ever saw was a photocopy. There never was an original."

"Rankin knows his way around computers. You'd think he'd have noticed the suspicious consistency of the characters."

"*I* didn't, until it was explained. Neither did you, and we're both trained to spot fakes. He was predisposed to accept it as genuine, based on his wife's close ties with Garbo and his own fears for her good name." She scrutinized the coffee spots on the paper, then crumpled it and used it to wipe her hands. "One snag. In order to forge this letter, Akers had to have had access to something fairly lengthy written by Garbo in her own hand, providing him with a complete alphabet and punctuation. You'd be surprised how many letters you can write without using everything. I know *I* was, when the graphologist told me."

"Rankin said his wife burned all of her Garbo letters at her request. Of course, he also said this one might have escaped the fire to fall into Akers' hands."

"Too convenient."

Valentino sat up, jerked taut by a sudden certainty. "A number

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of Garbo letters went missing from the Swedish Military Archives earlier this year. Rankin told me he'd just returned from Stockholm when the news got out."

"Was Akers with him on the trip?"

"He didn't say."

"We'll ask him. If they can place his assistant in Sweden at the time, and if he spoke a word of Swedish during his visit, they can close the file on this one. No jury would convict Rankin for defending himself against a confirmed blackmailer." Her face softened. "You gain, too. Your goddess's reputation is intact."

"It is," he agreed, and reached across the table to squeeze her hand.

Airline and hotel records and eyewitnesses agreed that Roger Akers had accompanied Matthew Rankin to Stockholm shortly before the theft of Garbo's letters was reported. Further testimony and the discovery of Berlitz tapes in Akers' West Hollywood apartment indicated that he could have forged a letter in convincing Swedish. Then bank records showed monthly deposits of several thousand dollars in Akers' account and matching amounts withdrawn from Rankin's. The district attorney, a stubborn man with eyes on Sacramento, refused to dismiss charges, but abandoned his opposition to bail. Rankin was released on his own recognizance pending further investigation. Few believed the case would ever come to trial.

Valentino and Harriet attended a party thrown by Rankin to celebrate his freedom, this time without costumes. Their host asked them to join him in his study, where he poured them each a glass of champagne from a stock unavailable to his other guests. The Persian rug had been removed, along with every other reminder of the tragedy that had taken place in that room.

"I won't join you," he said, pouring himself a glass of water from a pitcher. "I gave up the stuff when this mess began. You want your wits about you when you're being bled dry."

Valentino proposed a toast to liberty, but Rankin vetoed it. "To Miss Johansen." He raised his glass. "If she hadn't given me the shock of my life, my sad case might never have fallen into Valentino's hands."

As the pair stirred themselves to rejoin the others, Rankin held up a hand and slid aside a framed photograph of Garbo and Andrea Rankin, swathed in striped terry and wearing picture hats, laughing at some poolside. He worked the combination of the safe thus exposed and removed from it two flat aluminum cans nearly as big as bicycle wheels, which he extended to Valentino. "You went a roundabout way of earning it, but I'm not complaining."

The cans were labeled in Swedish. Harriet translated. *"How Not to Dress.* Congratulations, Val. It's the next best thing to a private conversation with her."

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"It's better," he said. "Silence lasts longer than talk."

That night he screened Greta Garbo's first picture on the reconditioned Bell & Howell projector in The Oracle, the dilapidated movie theater he lived in and had been renovating forever, and which was still forever away from completion. Harriet, who knew him better than anyone, had not asked to share this highly personal experience. A dreary period promotional feature, the two reels were notable only for the world's first glimpse of the immortal star at sixteen, plump and awkward, yet possessing even then that Certain Something that separated the greats from the vast gray crowd. It was a valuable artifact, if undiverting for general audiences.

When it ended, he resealed it and threaded another film into the machine. It was one of two he'd signed out from UCLA that day, unaware of the boon coming his way from Rankin: *The Temptress,* one of Garbo's very best silents, and *Anna Christie,* her first talking picture. Valentino watched them back to back. Whatever she'd sacrificed in the way of mystery during the transition to sound, she'd more than made up for in raw animal allure. That unexpectedly guttural voice, heavily accented, had made an instant classic of her first spoken line: "Gimme a vhisky. Ginger ale on the side. And don't be stingy, baby."

His telephone rang just as her order was delivered. He stopped the film, turned off the projector, and answered.

"I knew you'd still be up," greeted Harriet. "You can't sleep with a new acquisition burning a hole in your pocket."

"What's your excuse?"

"Too much champagne. It puts me to sleep, then wakes me up in the middle of the night. I turned on the TV for company. You'd be surprised what they pick out to put on the late news."

After that conversation, Valentino dialed Rankin's number. The master of the house came on after just two rings. "Housekeeper's in bed," Rankin said. "I seldom turn in earlier than three A.M. after a party. This old recluse can't take the strain."

"Have you been watching television?"

"No, just sitting here in my study, combing the 'Net for an estimate of how much my employees are cheating me out of."

"Stockholm police arrested the man who stole the Garbo letters from the military archive. He's a Swedish citizen. They caught him trying to sell the letters on eBay. They've recovered them all."

"Oh."

"Harriet told me. She called downtown. The D.A. is considering swearing out another warrant for your arrest. The way he sees it, if Roger Akers didn't steal the letters he couldn't have committed the forgery. No forgery means no blackmail, and the whole chain of reasoning falls apart right down to your self-defense plea."

"That's ludicrous! What about the photocopy? What about all the

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other evidence?"

"Circumstantial. He thinks you faked it all."

"How could I forge the letter? Andrea burned all of Greta's."

"He says we've only your word on that."

"Did it occur to him *Roger* might have found some unburned letters and used them to make the fake?"

"You had better access." Valentino paused. "It would be different if they found some of them at Akers' place, but they made a complete search and came up empty."

"Complete, my foot. That headline-happy D.A. wanted me on a platter." Rankin was breathing heavily. "Thank you for the warning. I'll wake up my lawyer." The line went dead.

The next morning, Matthew Rankin, in the presence of his attorney, surrendered himself to the police at their headquarters in Beverly Hills. The judge presiding at the arraignment, annoyed to find the case before him a second time, denied the district attorney's request to hold the defendant without bail and released him on a $100,000 bond.

The news report was eclipsed later that day when a second search of Roger Akers' apartment recovered a bundle of letters in Greta Garbo's hand under a loose floorboard in the bedroom. All were addressed to Andrea Rankin and unsigned, as had been the star's habit.

Valentino and Harriet were present as invited guests when the D.A., a solid, square-built fifty in a battleship-gray suit, met Rankin in his study to apologize. Three local TV stations were represented with cameras and microphones; part of Rankin's terms for agreeing not to sue the city for false arrest. A Beverly Hills officer was also on hand, carrying a video camera no larger than a squab.

Rankin noted the last with a malicious smile. "A personal record, to prevent you from repeating the mistake?"

The D.A.'s face was expressionless. "He's not here to tape anything. Officer?"

Rankin stood in the center of the room. The officer stepped forward and turned the camera to show him the tiny monitor that flipped out from the side. The reporters moved in tight, their much larger cameras recording Rankin's reaction to the tape that was playing. Valentino and Harriet stood clear. They'd seen it already: a clear image of Matthew Rankin prying up a floorboard in Roger Akers' bedroom and depositing a bundle of letters in the recess beneath. Greta Garbo's distinctive handwriting was visible on the envelope on top of the bundle.

"Nanny cam," said the D.A. "Ironic, considering how much time Garbo spent on camera and how many years she spent avoiding them. We didn't know where you'd hide the letters, so we set one up in every room. We barely got them planted in time. You moved

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pretty fast after Mr. Valentino called you."

There was no response. The D.A. took the camera from the officer, freeing his hands to place manacles on Rankin's wrists.

"I poisoned my wife."

Matthew Rankin looked aristocratic no longer. Seated at a plain maple table across from the detective interviewing him, his well-dressed lawyer looking tragic in a corner, he was just an old man with a tired face wearing an orange Los Angeles County jumpsuit. Even his tan had begun to fade. Valentino and Harriet, whose credentials had gotten them in, watched him through two-way glass and listened to his beaten voice droning through the intercom.

"I started out as a chemist, you know," he said. "I put in so much work developing a toxin that would counterfeit the symptoms of a heart attack I thought it was a shame I couldn't market it."

"Why did you kill her?" asked the detective.

"She inherited the department-store business. I was just a glorified employee, and when the malls threatened all the downtown stores, she blamed me for poor management. She was going to replace me with some young hotshot. I'm sorry she didn't live to see me reinvest what she'd left me into the technology necessary to turn the business around. I designed the program. Compared to that, using an ordinary PC to forge that Garbo letter was kid stuff. A little public humiliation over having been married to a lesbian isn't a patch on a first-degree murder charge."

"How did Roger Akers find out you'd killed Andrea?"

"I got drunk and said something. I didn't remember it later, but he made sure to remind me. That's why I quit drinking. I couldn't take the chance of betraying myself in front of someone else and adding another blackmailer to the list."

"When did he start blackmailing you?"

"He sprang it on me just before the trip to Stockholm. I spent the whole trip worrying what a toxicologist would find if Akers reported me and the body were exhumed. I started paying right after we got back. Then when I heard some Garbo letters disappeared from the Swedish archives at the same time we were over there, I saw my way out.

"I went on paying him for months," he continued, "building up evidence to support my story. Claiming I'd finally decided to stop established a motive for him to attack me, and I doubted the law would go out of its way to convict the victim of a rotten extortionist. I even tricked Akers into putting his fingerprints on the photocopy of the fake letter by pretending I'd mixed it up with another document I wanted him to handle. He gave it right back. He'd picked up just enough Swedish to get by in Stockholm; I was pretty sure he couldn't read a word of the written language. That's why I didn't write it in English. I got a good education listening to

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Andrea's conversations with her mother all those years ago. A little study helped me brush it up."

"How'd you get Akers to put his prints on the murder weapon?"

Rankin smiled bitterly. "I told him his latest payment was in an envelope under the bust. He though I was being churlish. When he picked it up, I shot him."

"What made you choose Valentino as your witness?"

"It could have been anyone. I made up my mind to plant the story with him right there in my study, that night I fainted." He shuddered. "Lord, that girlfriend of his was the spitting image of Garbo in that costume. I thought I was being haunted for my sins. Anyway he was a civilian—a cop would have arrested Roger, and he'd have talked—and that 'film detective' conceit gave me a plausible reason to rope him in."

"You need to have new cards printed," Harriet whispered to Valentino. "'Archivist' wouldn't have landed you in this mess."

He shushed her. Rankin was speaking again.

". . . overlooked a bunch of letters when she burned the rest; there were so many to begin with, I half suspected they *were* having a homosexual affair. I suppose that's what put the idea in my head after that theft took place in Sweden. I only hung on to the leftovers because I thought they might be valuable. I was right; they gave me more than I needed to create a font using Garbo's handwriting. It didn't have to hold up to scrutiny. I just had to convince people I'd been duped."

"For the record," said the detective, "here in the presence of your attorney, you, Matthew Rankin, confess to planning the murders of your wife, Andrea Rankin, and your assistant, Roger Akers, and carrying out those murders."

"Yes. If it will spare me from the executioner."

In the elevator on their way to the ground floor and out, Valentino was silent. Harriet took his hand. "You didn't betray him," she said. "He used your relationship with him to get away with murder, and you used it right back at him to put a killer behind bars. The evidence might never have surfaced if you hadn't tricked him into producing it himself."

"I know. I'd feel better about it if he hadn't given me *How Not to Dress.*"

"He saw it as paying you off for services rendered."

"That's what I mean."

"It's your life's calling to rescue the past from extinction."

"Yes, and that's how I'll get over it."

She leaned against him and lowered her voice a full octave. "Do you vant to be alone?"

He pressed the stop button. As the elevator lurched to a halt, he took her in his arms. "What do *you* think?" ●

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As the Saying Goes

by Conrad Lawrence

"Geoffrey Hardman fell down the elevator shaft from the twenty-seventh floor and lived to tell about it."

"Yeah, he told the guy on the twenty-sixth, the twenty-fifth, the twenty-fourth . . ."

By the time Charlie Malak had reached his cubicle, also on the 27th floor, he'd heard the joke *du jour* four times. He hung on to the partition of his cubicle, panting, having just climbed the 702 steps between the 27th floor and the lobby—not that Charlie had counted each step, just the first two flights. After that he counted the flights. It made for easy calculation.

Conrad Lawrence last appeared in *EQMM* in 2005. He returns with a whodunit whose clues are buried in office politics. Mr. Lawrence is a former cinematographer who works as a fine-art photographer, artist, and writer. His books include *The Council to Save the Planet,* which *Chicago Magazine* described as "a wonderful piece of speculative fiction, depicting the near future where people are given a second chance to learn to better care for their planet."

The elevator didn't work.

Well, actually it worked, but the police had it shut down. Geoffrey Hardman really had fallen down the shaft the night before, except there had been no one on the 26th floor, or the 25th, and so on, to report what he might have had to say about the experience.

Charlie gazed down the aisle into the land of secrets: the cubicles of his colleagues in "The Bevy." He knew their secrets. They spoke in hushed tones around him, treating him like a nonentity, an object, forgetting he had ears, unless they found it convenient he should have ears. Someone had a big secret that morning. With his eyes, Charlie stopped at each cubicle, visualizing each occupant, considering the secrets he knew each possessed and how those secrets related to Geoffrey's fall. His trip ended with the last cubicle on the left, Mary's, and he looked away.

Hanging around the lobby, hoping that the police would restart the elevator so he wouldn't have to take the steps, Charlie had learned that no one knew Geoffrey had fallen down the shaft until

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this morning. Romero, from Maintenance, had heard Geoffrey's cell phone ringing from the elevator. Geoffrey's wife had been trying to reach him, wondering why Geoffrey hadn't come home the night before, though she suspected he'd stayed at the office, or with *that woman from the office,* or a combination thereof. Anyway, while retrieving the lost phone, Romero had found Geoffrey impaled on the stop springs at the bottom of the elevator shaft, Osterized by an uncaring elevator that had gone about its usual business: up, down, crunch, mash.

Charlie wondered what kind of saying Geoffrey would use in this situation. When it came to idiomatic expressions, Geoffrey knew them all, for every occasion. Charlie thought of one that fit the occasion of someone falling to their death: "It's not the fall, it's the sudden stop."

No. Not even Geoffrey would be that crass—well, perhaps not.

Charlie considered the project at hand, a new Web front-end for the customer point of contact. He looked at his keyboard, keys dotted with orange stains, then to the bag of artificially cheddar-flavored corn puffs—last night's dinner. He'd stayed late, programming the back-end of the Web presence front-end. Always, he stayed late, programming the back-end of some front-end. He normally didn't mind. In the after-hours dim, immersed in writing code, the office became his little world. He'd sit at his computer, absorbed in his objects and classes and methods, the virtual entities of writing programs, no one there to disrupt the flow of his coding with silent reproachful reminders of his inadequacies.

He never saw that reproach in Mary's eyes.

Sometimes he'd take a break—"bio break," as Geoffrey would always refer to it during his pedantic meetings on the "corporate vision." He never failed to laugh. And always everyone laughed at Geoffrey's witticism, too, though the term had lost its funny a long time ago. Geoffrey had charge over setting the direction of the Web division, was the giver of promotions and, most importantly, the giver of raises. Being the boss afforded Geoffrey a lot of tolerance for his stupid humor.

Often, Charlie would see the men of the Web-presence Customer Service brigade or the Web-presence Sales vanguard in the bathroom during one of Geoffrey's "bio breaks," each standing before his own porcelain shrine, clutching himself, head back, groaning from relief, uttering the ritual, "God, he's such a jerk."

Sometimes, at night, Charlie would take a different kind of break from his work, not a renal-relief kind, but of another sort of bio-driven nature. He'd wander down the aisle to Mary's desk, looking at all her pictures. In each, someone shared a toothy smile with her. Always, someone stood beside her, with an arm clasped around her. Charlie would gaze at the pictures that depicted a life so different from his. He'd place himself behind one of those toothy

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smiles shared with Mary, hearing himself say words he'd probably never say. Words like, "Would you like to have dinner" or "go to the symphony." Each time he would hear himself stutter over "with me," and the fear of that stutter prevented his words from becoming real in Mary's presence.

Charlie had no pictures of himself with anyone beside him sharing a toothy smile. Oh well, he thought, and sighed. As Geoffrey would say, "Sometimes you eat the bear and sometimes the bear eats you."

Charlie still panted from the climb up the stairs, his build being of a roundish type. Last night Charlie hadn't been alone in his cocoon of objects, classes, methods, and datagrams. Geoffrey and Mary had been there, in Geoffrey's office. Charlie hadn't seen them. He'd heard them, loud and disturbing and distracting. At first their noises had been unintelligible and plaintive, then angry and succinct, mostly from Mary. Something about Geoffrey having a wife at home didn't sit well with Mary's constitution, that being of a marrying kind.

One time, about a week before, after Mary had stormed out of Geoffrey's office, Charlie had gone in to ask Geoffrey about the plan for the back-end of the Web front-end. The flowers Mary had brought him lay on his desk and the vase lay on the floor. Geoffrey wiped his face dry, smiled, and hid his anger behind one of his idiotic sayings.

"You know, Charlie, it's true. Hell hath no fury like a woman scorned."

No one would ever be plagued by Geoffrey's sayings again. Charlie looked into his coffee cup, considering the black and green fuzzy paste caked in the bottom of it, wondering how far the fury of scorn might take a woman. He didn't know. He'd never scorned a woman in his life. He knew he'd never evoke Mary's fury, because he'd never scorn her. She'd never be as angry with him as she got with Geoffrey. Charlie couldn't help envisioning himself helping, rescuing Mary, as it were, from her anger toward Geoffrey and thereby winning her affections. He wondered how late Mary had stayed after he'd left last night.

No answer lay in the fuzz at the bottom of his cup despite how hard he stared at it. Charlie didn't often drink coffee, but he hadn't slept well the night before. Mary, and her anger with Geoffrey, had been on his mind. He figured running hot water in his cup would rid it of the miniature terrarium growing in it.

Beside the kitchenette counter, where sat the automatic-drip coffee maker, stood The Bevy. The Bevy had always been cordial to Charlie, but never *included* him. Charlie was not of The Bevy, though he should be; he knew something about everyone in it. They muttered things to him, usually in anger, usually about Geoffrey, as if muttering to the dog.

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"Hi, Charlie," said The Bevy in its unified workplace social voice and created a path for Charlie to reach the sink.

"Hello—" Charlie almost added "—Bevy." "How's it going?"

"Did you hear," said the Robert component of The Bevy, "that Geoffrey fell down the elevator shaft and lived to tell about it?"

"Oh, Bob," reprimanded The Bevy's Sarah component, but an encouraging giggle trotted right after the admonishment.

"Yeah." Charlie spoke flatly and precisely, because he always spoke flatly and precisely. "He told several people on the floors below during the approximately three point seven seconds he was alive, the rate of acceleration during a fall being thirty-two feet per second, second."

"Gee, Charlie," responded Robert, "that's great."

"Eeew," said Sarah, watching Charlie run hot water into his cup.

"I mean," continued Robert, "that's really funny, you know. When you *think* about it." He forced a laugh.

The Bevy laughed.

Sarah gagged.

"Oh God." She watched Charlie pour coffee in his freshly "sanitized" cup. "Are you going to drink that?"

Charlie read Sarah's concern in the scrunched features of her face. "Though it's true that the temperature of hot tap water wouldn't kill *all* the bacteria in the cup, there's nothing in there that doesn't go into the making of a good antibiotic. Yes, I'm going to drink this."

Sarah gaped in chagrined horror as Charlie lifted the mug to his lips. Robert pulled the conversation away from Charlie's coffee habits.

"You guys think that maybe Geoffrey stepping into an open elevator shaft may not have been an accident?"

Sarah's chagrined horror became titillation.

"What are you saying? Of course it was an accident. I mean, who . . . "

The Bevy looked around, examining each other, seeing the secrets poking through each other's scratched facades. Then they studied their own coffee mugs or fingernails and The Bevy sauntered away, a herd wandering off over the corporate range, seeking a fresh pasture in which to avoid work.

"G'bye, Charlie."

Charlie turned from the coffee maker. Mary stared at the copier—alone, not having moved off with The Bevy. Mary held only part-time inclusion in The Bevy, and generally only when it consisted entirely of men, probably because her slender, angular build also possessed gratifying round aspects to it. When the female components of The Bevy were present, Mary stayed away. Mary had once been a full-time member of The Bevy, until she began having one-on-one lunches with Geoffrey, and after-hours

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"meetings" in his office, discussing marketing strategies—what else? Mary worked in Marketing.

Mary had been staring at the copier for so long that it had gone into power-save mode. Charlie approached, and when she looked at him he plied her with *your-secret-is-safe-with-me* eyes.

"How are you doing?" he said, using an assuring, protective tone not normally associated with a Systems geek. He considered telling her he knew she'd been in Geoffrey's office the night before, but decided it might be a bad idea. It might have the undertone of blackmail to it. He wanted Mary to actually like him.

"I'm *fine,* Charlie. Since when did you start drinking coffee?"

Charlie inflated. Mary *knew* that he didn't drink coffee. She *paid attention* to him. He shrugged.

"I just figured you might be a bit distressed by Geoffrey's death. You're still standing here, although the copier finished making your copies quite some time ago. You were pretty close to Geoffrey, this must be upsetting."

"No one was close to Geoffrey." Mary scooped up her copies, nodding across the office to where The Bevy had gathered by the matrix of mail slots. "I doubt anyone will go to his funeral unless a memo is sent out and raises are dependent upon it. What about you, Charlie, you gonna go to the funeral?"

"Sure, why not? He was my boss."

"Yeah, but he wasn't exactly nice to you. Actually, he was downright mean to you."

Charlie inflated even more. Mary had been observant and sensitive to the way people treated him. "You noticed?"

"Of course I noticed. Everyone did. It was almost embarrassing. How come you never stood up for yourself?"

Charlie deflated. Mary found him disappointing. "I thought you liked Geoffrey."

"'Like' isn't exactly the right word. I don't think the word 'like' and 'Geoffrey' belong in the same sentence. Not even his wife *liked* him."

Charlie wanted to ask Mary how she knew that, but he wasn't that bold. Besides, already knowing the answer made the question moot. Charlie looked at his own dark reflection in his coffee, searching for words that would comfort Mary and take him into her confidence.

"Mary, do you wonder what circumstances had to fall into place for Geoffrey to step into an elevator when no car was there?"

As soon as he'd asked, he wished he hadn't. Mary stiffened as if freeze-dried, her stare chilling Charlie. She turned away, shoulders slightly hunched, pulling her secrets deeper inside. Charlie cringed: Instead of stepping into Mary's circle, he'd caused her to close it. Mary pulled the papers from the copier and tossed a chin at the gossip-grazing Bevy.

"Who do you think did it?"

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"What?"

"Who do you think pushed Geoffrey down the shaft, Charlie?"

Charlie eyed Mary with suspicion. Why did she ask? If anyone would know, it would be her.

"What makes you think someone pushed him? Maybe he jumped on his own."

"Naw. Geoffrey would never do that. Too assured of himself, even when he was wrong, despite being a jerk."

"They found the key to the elevator door with him at the bottom of the shaft, like he'd taken it with him when he jumped. Must have stolen it from Maintenance."

Mary nearly gasped, as if one of her secrets had been found out. "*How* do you know that, Charlie?"

Charlie blinked and stepped back. "I heard the police talking about it, downstairs—when I came in through the lobby."

Mary's eyes widened. "You spoke to the police?"

Charlie took another step back from Mary. "No. I just overheard them speaking. I would never speak to the police—about you."

A sub-zero atmosphere descended around Mary and Charlie. Mary leveled icy eyes on Charlie.

"Of course you wouldn't, Charlie. Why would you have anything to say to the police about me?"

Charlie shrugged.

Mary left.

The police arrived with questions, oh so many questions. Of course, the others all immediately directed the police to Mary, discretion no longer being a survival skill. Charlie remembered the time when upper management had come to Geoffrey's office and warned him against any "office fraternization." Geoffrey had come out of his office looking beleaguered. He sighed and spoke to Charlie in a tone of fatherly advice while delivering one of his maxims.

"Charlie, don't ever get your meat where you get your bread."

Charlie gaped at the ribald implication of Geoffrey's adage. At his next staff meeting, Geoffrey allowed for no "bio breaks" and made a threatening announcement of layoffs. Discretion not only became wise, but necessary. Mary and Geoffrey continued their one-on-one meetings in his office, usually after-hours.

Staring down at his keyboard, Charlie considered wiping off the orange stains while he listened to words muted to unintelligibility by the door of the conference room. He could hear the earnest tones of the police offset by Mary's anxious, frightened tone. One word came through succinctly in Mary's voice.

"No!"

Regardless of what Mary might have done, Charlie wished he could whisk her from the attack of the police interrogators. When the door to the conference room opened, it framed Mary with on-the-verge-of-tears red eyes and though she was fully clothed, her

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posture was that of a naked person not allowed to cover herself. The Bevy had recongregated at the coffee maker, which conveniently gave them a view of the conference room, hissing in their collective secretive tone. Seeing Mary, they spoke in conglomeration.

"How're you doing, Mary?"

"Hang in there, girl."

"'Atta girl. Stay strong."

"Come over here for a minute."

Mary straightened. It seemed that with the demise of Geoffrey, her status in The Bevy was about to be restored. As she moved past him to take her reinstated place, she spoke to Charlie in a low voice, her lips barely moving. "I wasn't here last night, okay, Charlie?"

Charlie replied with a simple nod. Mary moved forward to be reabsorbed into the social strata of the office. The Robert component enfolded her with a big arm wrapped over her slender shoulders. Robert had been Mary's office romance until Geoffrey had been promoted to V.P. in charge of whatever he had been in charge of. With Geoffrey gone, Robert would surely be placed in charge of whatever Geoffrey had been in charge of. He could afford to be magnanimous with Mary.

"I'm so sorry, baby. I know you were close. We'd all like to take you to lunch today, calm you down a bit. Be there for you and all that."

Charlie watched Robert and Mary, feeling what it might be like to have her under his arm. Certainly he knew he'd be better suited to "be there for her" than Robert. He doubted Robert would want to protect Mary the way he would. Robert didn't know what he knew, but if he did, Robert would sell Mary's secret at the first chance he saw an opportunity for gain. Something sizzled annoyingly into Charlie's thoughts of the unfairness of office politics. He looked toward the source of the sizzling. One of the police detectives had set a buttock cheek on his desk, examining the mostly empty bag of artificially cheddar-flavored corn puffs. The police detective held it up.

"Dinner?"

Charlie nodded. The detective grimaced at Charlie's keyboard.

"You were here late last night?"

"I'm always here late. That's when I do my programming."

The cop looked at a clock Charlie kept on his desk.

"Interesting."

Everyone found the clock to be "interesting." An old-fashioned shelf clock that needed to be plugged in and still had hour, minute, and sweep hands *would* be interesting.

"Yeah. I collect old clocks. Have a bunch more at home."

"It's slow."

Charlie glanced to The Bevy. Swarming around Mary, they looked back at Charlie with frightened, about-to-be-sheared sheep eyes.

"I'm Stan. Why don't we go into the conference room."

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Charlie shook the hand Stan had extended as a greeting, then followed him into the conference room. There were three other police people, none of whom introduced themselves. All of them were much less friendly than Stan.

"Charlie, how late were you here last night?"

"Until," Charlie thought, and then thought again, "about seven P.M."

"Was anyone else here?"

"Geoffrey was here."

"Did you see him?"

"No. I could hear him in his office."

"Hear him?"

"Yes. Making noise, banging around. Talking."

"Banging around? What kind of banging around?"

Charlie pictured what he could only imagine. He tried to envision himself in Geoffrey's place, then thought of the vulnerable Mary, dependent on him at that moment.

"I dunno. Moving around or something. I couldn't see what he was doing. The door was closed."

"Talking? To whom? Who was he talking to?"

"I dunno."

"Was he alone?"

"Yes."

"Then who would he be talking to?"

"Himself."

"Himself?"

Charlie had to think for a moment. "Yes, himself. He would often practice things he wanted to say in meetings."

"Things like what?"

"Things."

"Like what?"

"Like, 'Don't try to teach a pig to sing. It's a waste of time and it only annoys the pig.' Or, 'When you're up to your ass in alligators, it's hard to remember your original purpose is to drain the swamp.'"

"He'd say things like *that?*"

"Yes."

"In meetings?"

"Yes."

"Really? Were his meetings interesting?"

"Not particularly."

"So, no one else was with him?"

"No."

"Are you sure?"

For the briefest of moments, Charlie's eyes drifted up and to the right. Then he pushed the image of Geoffrey and Mary out of his mind.

"Yes."

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One of the less friendly detectives fixed Charlie with one of those give-it-to-me-straight gazes that police learn.

"Was Mary with him?"

"No."

Charlie spent another hour with the police, who took turns asking variations of the same questions. When he left the conference room, the congregation around the coffee maker had dispersed. One by one, heads poked out from cubicles. Then one by one those heads appeared at Charlie's cubicle to ask him varying renditions of the same question: "Did they ask about Mary?"

Robert appeared first. Before Charlie could answer, Stan interrupted from the door of the conference room.

"Your name is Robert, isn't it? We'd like to speak with you. Could you come in here?"

Robert's eyes widened, then squinted at Charlie looking for an answer Charlie never gave him. While Robert's questioning took place, each Bevy-ite visited Charlie, asking his or her version of "the question," then retreated to his or her cubicle. Charlie realized he had a *key role,* one that might gain him position in The Bevy, alongside Mary. His questioning finished, Robert exited the conference room in the same I-feel-naked manner as Mary. Like her, he paused at Charlie's desk and spoke in the muted, lips-not-moving way she had.

"I was never jealous that Geoffrey got the promotion I should have had, or that Mary liked him for a while, right, Charlie? Right?"

When Charlie thought about it, losing a promotion and a girl to someone else, especially someone like Geoffrey, would almost be enough for some men to want to kill. Still, giving Robert away to the police would diminish him in Mary's eyes.

Sarah, the next Bevy-ite summoned, left the conference room the same way Mary and Robert had, with a tight-lipped, secret admonishment for Charlie.

"I never despised Geoffrey for picking Mary over me. Did I, Charlie?"

"Well . . ."

Hell really had no fury like a woman scorned, thought Charlie.

"Charlie!"

"I guess not."

So it went with each of the remaining Bevy-ites; each had his or her own shrouded message for Charlie as they fled the conference room. Charlie now held some protected confidence over everyone in The Bevy. Just as Charlie gave his now-practiced assuring nod to the last of his colleagues to leave the conference room, Stan appeared beside his desk.

"Geoffrey was not a well-liked man, was he, Charlie?"

"No, sir, I guess not."

"You didn't say much bad about him, Charlie, not compared to

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the others."

"I guess I didn't."

"The others said Geoffrey was pretty mean to you."

Charlie looked off toward the cubicles, where sat his colleagues.

"Are the others kind of mean to you also, Charlie?"

"I guess so."

"Did you like Geoffrey?"

"I guess not."

"Why didn't you say anything about Geoffrey being mean?"

"If you can't say something nice . . ."

"Yah, yah. Don't say anything—I know, Charlie, I know. Did Geoffrey say that?"

"Can't say I've ever heard him say anything like *that.*"

"Look, Charlie. Are you sure no one else was here?"

"No."

"No? No one was here? Or, no, you're not sure?"

"Not sure."

"Then why did you say, earlier, that no one was here?"

"I didn't say that. You asked if Geoffrey was alone. I said he was."

"I guess that's right. Well then, who was here, besides you and Geoffrey?"

"I don't know. I don't know if anyone was here. How do you know that Geoffrey didn't jump down the elevator shaft?"

Stan studied a stray artificially flavored cheddar-cheese corn puff lying on Charlie's desk.

"Now that you mention it, Charlie, I guess I don't, for sure. I do know that it's time for lunch."

Stan left, taking the rest of the police with him, and The Bevy left, too, taking Mary to lunch, leaving Charlie to find the only person in the building who ever had lunch with him: Romero, the maintenance guy. As always, Charlie took his brown-bag lunch down to Romero's "office," a small utility room with a card table, two folding chairs, and a bulletin board just off the boiler room.

They spoke about the only thing anyone spoke about in the building that day, only without the joke *du jour.* Finding Geoffrey's mangled body had left Romero pretty shaken up and not the least bit in a joking mood. Charlie listened to him talk and imagined having lunch with Mary, who, in his fantasy, had found a new appreciation for Charlie through his gallant confidentiality.

Charlie returned from lunch hoping that events would change his status with his coworkers, especially Mary. The police returned from lunch confused by the case. Mary returned from lunch canonized. Everyone believed that she had pushed Geoffrey down the shaft. The police couldn't prove it. No one else wanted to. Mary didn't want to lose her St. Mary status, but she didn't want to go to jail, either.

Not much work got done that day and certainly Charlie hadn't

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gotten much work done the night before, with all the distractions. So, he stayed late again, and Mary did as well. After the police and everyone else had left, Mary came to him.

"Thanks, Charlie. I know that you knew I was here last night. I know you were here also.

"What happened last night, Charlie? Where did you go? The lights went out and Geoffrey went to investigate. I came out of his office and you weren't here. When the lights came back on, Geoffrey never came back. Neither did you. I waited for a while and then I went home."

"I went home too, Mary. Couldn't get any work done here. No point in staying."

"Well thanks, Charlie. It was nice of you to do as I asked and not tell anyone. I'm not sure why you did, though."

"I guess I figured it would be better for you if no one knew."

The real answer Charlie wanted to give Mary required more boldness than he possessed.

"Well, thanks so much."

Charlie watched her walk away, his heart beating as if they had shared a *moment,* an important moment.

"Mary?"

Mary turned back. "Yes, Charlie?"

"Would you . . . ? Would you like to get lunch sometime?"

"Absolutely, Charlie. I would like that."

The next day, the police returned: Stan and one of the other not-so-friendly detectives.

"Hey, Charlie, this is Dan. He's my partner."

"Hi, Charlie."

"Hello, Detective Dan."

"Look, Charlie, we were wondering why you didn't tell us that the power had gone out the night before last, when Geoffrey died."

Charlie looked at, then past, Stan. At the end of the aisle, Mary looked on, eyes filled with anxious concern.

"I didn't know. Must have happened after I left."

"Yeah. Went out for about twenty minutes, on this floor only. You didn't know?"

"No, sir."

"You didn't notice that your clock is about twenty minutes behind time?"

Charlie looked at his "interesting" shelf clock.

"Oh, look at that. I guess I don't really use that clock for time. It's just decoration."

"Yeah, okay. Romero, the maintenance guy, says the circuit box is in a utility closet by the elevators. Often, Housekeeping leaves it unlocked so they can get their cleaning things in and out. Anyone could have gone in there and shut off the power, anyone who knew the door was open or just happened to check. Charlie, are you sure

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no one else was here the other night?"

Charlie caught himself before his eyes flicked toward Mary.

"Like I said, I didn't see anyone else."

"You're friends with Romero, aren't you, Charlie?"

Charlie feared something accusatory might follow that question.

"Yeah, I guess."

"Then maybe you can tell us why he had Mary's phone number and address on his bulletin board downstairs."

"I think he needed extra money and fixed some things at her place on weekends. You should ask her."

"We will. Think she might have known about the utility closet being unlocked?"

"You'd have to ask her. How would I know something like that? I doubt she would."

"Why would you doubt that, Charlie?"

"I know her. That's not the kind of thing that would interest her. Look, since the power went out, isn't it possible that the door got stuck open and Geoffrey accidentally walked into the open elevator shaft?"

Stan shook his head.

"Very unlikely. No way to explain why the elevator door would open without an elevator, just because the power went out. Plus, why would Geoffrey leave without his coat and briefcase?"

Dan spoke, crisp and quick, as if to take Charlie off guard.

"Was Mary here the night that Geoffrey was killed?"

"No!"

"How can you be so sure? You said before, you just didn't hear anyone."

Charlie peeked between Dan and Stan. Mary peered around the edge of her cubicle, eyes wide with terror.

"Mary's cubicle is just down the aisle. If she were here, I'm sure I would have known."

Stan's and Dan's eyes followed Charlie's when they flicked toward Mary.

Mary tried to retract into her cubicle like a turtle.

"Hello, Mary." Dan almost sounded spritelike.

Mary hadn't been quick enough.

"Can you come here?" Stan, in contrast, sounded fatherly, a stern father, like Charlie's father when Charlie's report card didn't quite rise to expectations.

Mary peered around her cubicle wall, then shuffled to Charlie's cubicle. Dan studied Mary's face the way a collector would study a face in a painting, looking for details, color, texture—lies. Dan examined. Stan spoke.

"I hate to be morbid, but the pathologist found something interesting when examining Geoffrey's body. It was hard to see at first because he'd been mangled pretty badly, but there was lipstick on

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his neck, red lipstick. Sorry to be gruesome, but it sorta blended in with all the blood, so we didn't find it until now."

Dan squinted and bent closer to Mary, studying her lips.

"What color red would you call your lipstick, Mary? Would you call that 'blood red'?"

"No! It's 'Fire Engine Red.'"

Dan nodded. Stan spoke.

"Do you always wear red lipstick?"

"Yes. Even though I'm a redhead, it looks great on me."

Dan nodded, then spoke.

"So it does. Do you have your lipstick here?"

"Yes."

"Please go get it for me."

While Mary scurried back to her desk Dan spoke to Charlie.

"The pathologist said the lipstick on Geoffrey's collar is by Lorelei."

Mary returned, holding out a small cylinder for Dan's inspection. Dan took it and held it out for Stan. Stan took it and held it out for Charlie's inspection. The label on the bottom of the little gold tube identified it as "Lorelei's Fire Engine Red."

"Mary, can we speak with you in the conference room, please?" Dan took the lipstick cylinder from Stan and led Mary away. Stan followed.

As usual, Charlie couldn't make out the words, only voices and tones. Dan spoke in a reedy, accusing voice. Stan maintained a firm, assuring, but direct tone. Mary pleaded in a nervous, vulnerable tone that made Charlie want to barge into the conference room, but he had no idea what he would do once he'd crossed the threshold. Telling Stan and Dan to leave her alone seemed ludicrous. The same repetitive word as before came through the door, in Mary's voice.

"No! . . . No! . . . No!"

When the door opened, Mary's posture reminded Charlie of one of the girls he knew in Catholic school when she had to face the Sisters over some disciplinary problem. Mary didn't look at Charlie when she zombie-shuffled past him. Her lips hardly moved as she spoke.

"Sorry, Charlie."

Charlie watched as she slipped into her cubicle, hangdog, droopy shouldered.

"Charlie." Stan stood beside his desk, purposely speaking loud enough for everyone to hear. "We are confused. You were here the night Geoffrey died. So maybe you can tell us how he got lipstick on his neck, if Mary *wasn't* here?"

Heads poked out from around cubicles, all except Mary's. Charlie watched for her to reappear, wondering if she was so scared that she would try to cast suspicion on someone who was trying to protect her from the accusations that would certainly be forthcoming if everything were known.

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"I don't know. Did you check with Geoffrey's wife, to see what kind of lipstick she wore? Maybe she has the same kind of lipstick. Lorelei is a fairly *common* lipstick and Geoffrey's wife has similar coloring to Mary's. She's a redhead, too. Geoffrey liked redheads."

Mary's head poked out from her cubicle, completing The Bevy. Everyone watched Charlie. Charlie looked into Mary's eyes with protectiveness, seeking signs of betrayal. Stan and Dan looked at each other, considering the possibilities, then Stan looked at Charlie.

"Did he say why he liked redheads?"

Charlie studied Mary's eyes. Mary studied Charlie's; he was sure she could see something in them that had never been there before for her, the flicker of anger. Charlie saw fear.

"Of course. Geoffrey always had something to say about everything."

"What did he say?"

Mary's eyes widened. Charlie's narrowed.

"He said they were—*loose*. He liked them because they were loose."

Everyone looked to Mary. Mary looked to everyone. Dan and Stan surveyed them all. Dan's hand snaked out, extending a pointing, commanding finger.

"You! It's Sarah, right? Come with us."

Sarah followed Stan and Dan into the conference room. Muted tones of accusation, assurance, and pleading escaped through the conference-room door, repeating as each of The Bevy was called into the conference room again. Each time a Bevy-ite left the room, they glided past Charlie, muttering in an apologetic tone.

"Oh, Charlie."

Charlie watched the last of them, feeling as if he were being sacrificed for the safety of The Bevy.

"Charlie, could you come in here?"

Framed in the conference-room door, Stan waited for him. Charlie entered. Stan shut the door. Dan began the questions.

"Charlie, everyone says that Geoffrey was very, very mean to you. That he regularly made fun of you and humiliated you in front of everyone."

"I suppose he did."

"How come you've never mentioned to us that this makes you mad? I would think it would make me mad. Does it make you mad, Charlie?"

"Yes, of course it does—did."

"How come you never mentioned that? Everyone said it was weird the way you never complained, kinda creepy the way you kept it in."

Charlie looked at the door, imagining his colleagues crowded together at the end of the aisle, speaking in low voices, getting *The Story* straight. Why had he always wanted to be a Bevy-ite?

"Are they all saying that they think I killed Geoffrey because he

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made fun of me?"

"Well, I don't know about that. But Mary did mention how hard you worked without ever getting Geoffrey's recognition."

Charlie continued to stare at the door, imagining Mary standing with The Bevy, speaking in the same low tones. Did he really still want to protect her?

"I told you I was here, but I left before Geoffrey did."

"Before the lights went out."

"Y-Yes."

"Well, that means you were the last one to see Geoffrey alive and his meanness toward you would certainly give you motive."

"Well, if being treated with malice is a motive for murder, then everyone had a motive."

"How's that, Charlie?"

Charlie searched the door, trying once again to picture The Bevy he'd always yearned to be part of.

"Well, Robert was supposed to get the promotion Geoffrey got. Geoffrey always gave the bad accounts to Larry, and kept the good ones for himself. Louise never got any bonuses and suspected it was because she never put out for Geoffrey. Sarah wanted to be Geoffrey's lover, but—but she wasn't."

"What about Mary, Charlie? Did she have any reason to want to kill Geoffrey?"

Charlie stared at the door, seeing Mary, so vulnerable, so in need of a man to marry, and Geoffrey wouldn't and now, couldn't.

"No. Mary had no reason."

"And you're sure she wasn't here that night?"

Through the door, Charlie pictured Mary, standing off from the others, eyes filled with remorseful guilt for her betrayal. He sighed. She had promised to go to lunch with him.

"No, she wasn't here that night, Stan."

When Dan opened the conference-room door for Charlie, The Bevy stood at the coffee maker, as he'd pictured. They stared at him with cattle-to-the-slaughter fear in their eyes. Charlie's shoulders drooped, knowing he'd never be one of them. He made eye contact with Mary. Her fearful eyes and slack, pleading mouth pulled Charlie's shoulders up. He nodded assurance at her.

Stan and Dan left, returning several times over the next week, always seeking time with one of the others, but not with Charlie. Everyone quit speaking with Charlie, refusing even to say hello. Late in the following week, Charlie stopped at Mary's desk.

"We spoke about getting lunch sometime. Do you have plans for today?"

Mary's eyes flashed around, surveying the reaction of the others.

"Sorry, Charlie, I don't have time."

"How 'bout tomorrow?"

"I can't."

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"Maybe next week?"

"Charlie, I'm sorry, but I'm up to my ears taking up the slack left by Geoffrey's death and this whole thing has been very unsettling. I'm not going to be able to go to lunch for quite some time."

"Charlie? Could you come here?"

Stan and Dan were standing beside Charlie's cubicle. Charlie walked over to them, feeling as if he were in a meat locker, chilled by Mary's aloofness. Stan pointed to Charlie's keyboard; the key for opening the elevator door lay on it.

"If you will notice, Charlie, the elevator key has the same orange stain on it as you have on your keyboard."

So it did. The key had been set on the keyboard, so that a nearly identical stain on it lined up with a stain on the keyboard. Dan spoke in his usual accusatory tone.

"There were stains like this on the circuit breakers in the closet by the elevators."

Stan spoke in his usual reassuring tone, but held out a folder of papers, payroll records.

"According to this, you're the only person here who didn't get a raise this year, or the last year or the year before. Did you ever ask Geoffrey for a raise?"

"Yes."

"What did he say?"

"He said no. He said I wasn't directly involved in generating revenue; that Systems was a necessary liability, but still a liability. He said that I didn't quite fit in."

Stan put a hand on Charlie's shoulder.

"Charlie? Didn't that seem just a bit—"

"—unfair?" Charlie jumped up. "Yes, it was unfair. I did all the work. I had to make the Web site that brought in all the money. I made it work. They," Charlie pointed at The Bevy, who watched with wide-eyed horror, "they did nothing, except to play and fool around with each other. Sarah wanted to sleep with Geoffrey. Geoffrey wanted to sleep with Louise, but she wouldn't have him. Geoffrey got a promotion because he took the corporate bosses on a vacation. Robert thought he deserved that promotion. Mary quit sleeping with Robert when Geoffrey got promoted; she wanted to marry Geoffrey. All of them were so busy screwing around that sales dropped. But I did my part. The Web site worked exactly as it should. I stayed and stayed and stayed to be sure. Still, promotion of the Web site was down, so revenue went down. They failed and got promotions. I did my job and got nothing!"

Stan soothed Charlie, coaxing him to sit.

"What happened the night Geoffrey died?"

"I was trying to work, but couldn't because of the noise Mary and Geoffrey made in his office. It wasn't right. Then, Mary got mad because Geoffrey wouldn't leave his wife. That was wrong. No

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one else was around, so I went down to Romero's office. He's my friend. I got the elevator key and opened the door to the elevator. Then I shut off the power to this floor. I hid in the shadows, waiting for Geoffrey to come out and investigate. He did, and when he walked over to the open elevator, I shoved him down the shaft and threw the elevator key in after him."

Charlie sort of expected The Bevy to clap, to canonize him as they had Mary.

The Bevy gasped.

Dan swore.

Mary sobbed.

Stan sighed.

"Charlie, did you ever tell Geoffrey that it was wrong not to give you a raise? Did you ever insist?"

"Yes, of course I did."

"How did Geoffrey react?"

"He laughed."

"Just laughed?" Dan's eyebrows pulled together in scepticism.

"Did he say anything?" Stan coaxed.

"Yes."

"What did he say?"

"He said, 'Charlie, sometimes you get the elevator, and sometimes you get the shaft.'" ●

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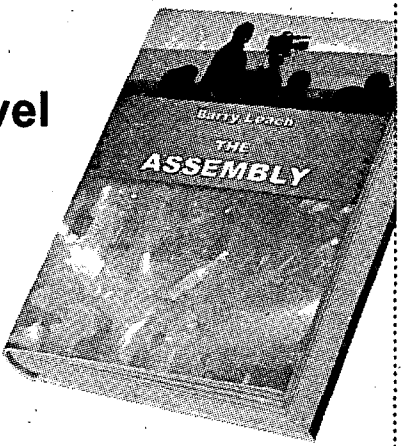

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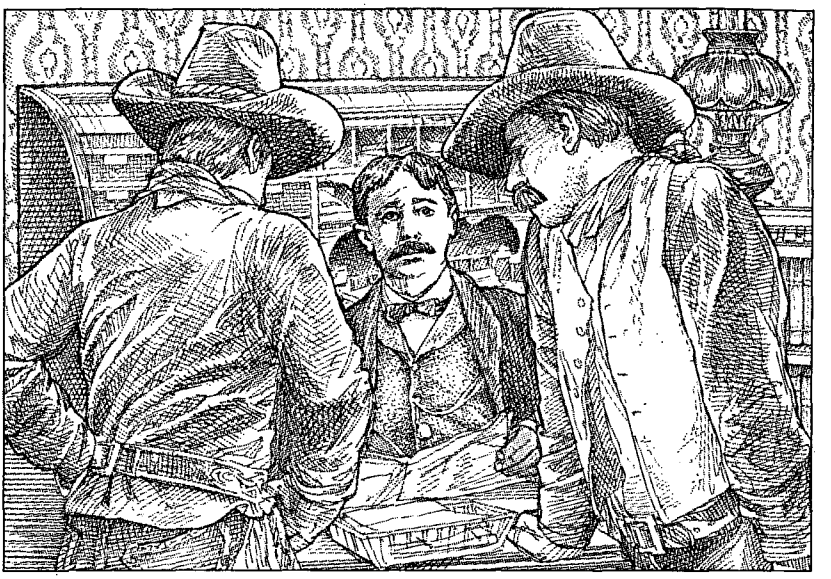

Art by Allen Davis

DEAR DR. WATSON

by Steve Hockensmith

Dr. John Watson
The Strand Magazine
George Newnes Ltd.
3 to 13 Southampton Street
Strand, London, England

Dear Dr. Watson,

"Better late than never" is one of those supposed truisms that's not always all that true. If you make chicken soup for a sick friend but forget to give it to him, let's say, you'd be ill-advised to serve it to him when he's up and about a month later—unless you're trying to get him sick all over again.

Nevertheless, my brother Gustav and I feel compelled to extend our sympathies to you regarding the loss of your friend, Mr. Sherlock Holmes. Though Mr. Holmes passed more than two years ago, we only learned of it recently, so in addition to sympathies we extend apologies if this missive merely serves to reopen an old wound. Sprinkling on salt is the last thing we'd want to do. Rather, we think (or at least hope) that we can offer some small measure of balm.

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Steve Hockensmith is an extraordinarily versatile writer: For his P.I. story "The Big Road," he received nominations for three awards: the Barry, the Macavity, and the Shamus. The amateur detective series to which the following story belongs is one of the best to see print in recent years. *Holmes on the Range*, the first book in the series, is out in paperback. The sequel, *On the Wrong Track*, is due soon from St. Martin's (hardcover).

I'm sure you've heard again and again that Mr. Holmes isn't really dead. Your remarkable accounts of his cases have graced him with an immortality of sorts, and so long as he's remembered, he's not truly gone. I can testify to the truthfulness of that—and take it a step further.

Mr. Holmes has attained more than fame. For some of us, he's become a way of life.

Not that Gustav and I could claim to be "consulting detectives" like your friend. Being cowhands in the American West, the only thing we're ever consulted on is which steer to rope and brand next. But my brother's determined to change that. And with the help of your stories, he just might succeed.

A stray copy of *The Strand* first introduced us to you and Mr. Holmes last year. Immediately, Gustav set about studying on the story inside ("The Red-Headed League") the way the college boys at Harvard and Yale study on . . . well, whatever it is they study. My formal education lasted a mere six years, you understand, while Gustav measures his schooling not in years but months. To this day, I have to do all his reading for him. But unlettered though he is, my brother's far from un*brained*, and he soon memorized "The Red-Headed League" and every other Holmes tale we could get a rope on.

Gustav's always been a gloomy sort of fellow—it's why he's known as "Old Red" in drovering circles. He may yet have the fiery-red hair of a young man, but he's prone to the black moods of a bitter, gray-bearded codger. He's still his old dark-tempered self most of the time, but that changes when he gets to talking about your stories. They light him up like a rusty old lantern that's been dusted off and fresh-filled with oil.

Old Red's even begun detecting, in an amateur enthusiast kind of way, and he's actually proved to be quite good at it—though *I'm* not always enthused about the danger his snooping can put us in. All the same, when Gustav set off in search of actual employment as a detective last month, I was riding right alongside him, bouncing from town to town across Montana and Wyoming. Some folks might ask why I'd be so willing to tag along on another fellow's crusade, but I reckon you're the last man on earth I'd have to explain that to.

Sadly, the first dozen or so detectives we encountered welcomed

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us not with open arms but with open contempt. The symbol of the Pinkerton National Detective Agency might be the great all-seeing eye, but it may as well be the great butt-kicking boot as far as we're concerned. When we weren't laughed out of town, we were simply ignored. Yet Gustav's determination never wavered.

"Well, that about does it for Montana," he said as we walked out of the Pink office in Missoula.

"Idaho?" I sighed. I closed the door behind me, but I could still hear the Pinkerton men guffawing inside.

Old Red nodded. "Idaho."

I turned for a last look in at the Pinks, intending to do what they'd just done to us. Namely, spit in their eye—in this case, the eye painted on their office window above the words "WE NEVER SLEEP." I saw one of the men inside headed toward us, though, so I thought it best to swallow my pride (and my phlegm) until we heard what he had to say. I poked Gustav with an elbow, and he turned around just as the detective opened the door and leaned outside.

"Hold on! I got a tip for you."

He was a portly man with the round, leering face of a little boy tormenting ants, and I was tempted to offer him a tip of my own—watch his mouth or he'd get it smacked.

"Oh?" I said instead.

The man nodded. "You two might not be fit to be Pinkertons, but I bet you'd make a fine couple of Bloebaums."

"A fine couple of what now?" Old Red asked, obviously unsure to what degree he should be insulted.

The chubby Pink grinned. "You wanna be detectives?" He jerked his big, hamlike head to the left. "Follow your nose."

Then he ducked inside and got back to laughing with his friends.

"You ever hear of a 'blow bomb'?" my brother asked me.

"Nope. But I can tell you this much: It ain't a compliment." I started toward the post where our horses were hitched. "Sorry, fellers—no rest for the weary. It's on to Idaho for the lot of us."

"Not yet, it ain't."

Before I'd even turned around, Gustav was clomping away up the clattering planks of the sidewalk.

"And just where are you goin'?"

"Takin' the man's tip," he said without looking back.

"That weren't no tip—it was a kick in the teeth!"

Old Red kept going. I muttered a curse and set after him.

It didn't take many strides to reach Gustav's side: I'm "Big Red" to my brother's "Old Red," and you don't earn a handle like mine with stumpy legs. But even little Tom Thumb himself would've caught up quick enough, for Gustav suddenly made the sort of stop you come to when walking into a brick wall.

He was staring at something ahead and to the left of us—another office window, I saw when I followed his line of sight.

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There was a large, pinkish triangle painted on the glass.

"Oh, you gotta be kiddin'," I said when I realized what it was.

The big blob was a nose. There were words printed both above and beneath it, and I read them aloud for Old Red's benefit.

THE BLOEBAUM NATIONAL DETECTIVE AGENCY
WE SNIFF OUT THE TRUTH
EST. 1892

This being June of 1893, of course, I didn't consider the agency's date of establishment much of an endorsement. I also thought its slogan and symbol, in a word, stunk.

None of that slowed Old Red down, though. He marched straight into that office. I followed, because . . . well, I reckon fellows like you and me just kind of get in the habit, don't we?

There wasn't much to the Bloebaum National Detective Agency's Missoula office. Three filing cabinets—battered. Two wicker chairs for clients—shabby. One desk—cluttered.

And one man—surprised.

"Yes?" the man said, jerking his gaze up from a newspaper spread across the desk. He was fortyish, well-dressed and good-looking, but his suit and his features alike had a washed-out quality, like a pretty picture that's starting to fade. "What do you want?"

There was an edge of fear in the man's voice.

My brother may be the deducifier—and the elder of the two of us to boot. But I'm the talker. So Old Red took off his weather-beaten Boss of the Plains and nodded at me.

"Good afternoon, sir," I said, sweeping my own hat off my head. "My name's Otto Amlingmeyer, and this is my brother Gustav. We'd just like a moment of your time to discuss any employment opportunities the Bloebaum Agency might have for . . ."

There was no point in continuing—not with the man laughing the way he was. It wasn't the scornful hooting we'd been hearing from the Pinks, though. It was a laugh of relief.

Old Red and I were dressed rough, for the trail. We looked like what we were—drifters, grub-line riders, saddle bums.

Or gunmen, maybe. Hired toughs.

It wouldn't rise to the level of "deduction" as Mr. Holmes would define it, but I could make a pretty decent guess just then. When we'd walked in, the man assumed we were there to stomp the stuffing out of him.

"You'll have to excuse me," he said, choking off his chuckles. "It's just that . . ." He shrugged, his manner quickly turning cold and dismissive. "There's no work for you here."

I put my hat back on. We'd just doubled our daily quota of rejection, and I was eager to find someone who'd actually be pleased to see us—the nearest bartender, for instance. But before I could

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head for the door, Gustav moved in the opposite direction, stepping closer to the man's desk, hat still in hand.

"Doesn't look like there's much work for you, either, Mr. Bloebaum."

The man scowled at him a moment, then looked down at his newspaper. "That's none of your business."

"It could be."

Bloebaum (for obviously my brother had him pegged correctly) slowly brought his gaze back up again. "What do you mean?"

"I mean it must be hard for a man in your position—trying to compete with a big outfit like the Pinkertons all by your lonesome. Folks see a half-empty office, one feller sittin' around readin' the paper, they think penny ante, second rate . . . and they just walk up the street to the Pinks. But it don't have to be like that."

Gustav's usually not one for blowing smoke, but he can be a regular chimney stack when he's detecting—or trying to land a job detecting, apparently.

Bloebaum smirked at him sourly. "So what I really need to do is pay a couple cowboys to run around in here pretending to be my busy staff?"

Old Red shook his head. "I ain't talkin' about pretendin'."

The detective sighed, his smile turning wistful. "Look, I know times are hard. I'm sure you two really need the work, but I can't—"

"I ain't talkin' about workin' for pay, neither."

Bloebaum blinked at him. "You're not?"

"Yeah," I blurted out. "You're not?"

"No. I ain't," Gustav said firmly. "We got us a little nest egg—"

"Hummingbird size, maybe," I cut in.

"—so we can put in a little stretch for free to show you what we can do," my brother plowed on. "We might look like your ordinary, everyday out-of-work waddies, but believe you me—we know a thing or two about deducifyin'. All we need is a chance to prove it."

Bloebaum furrowed his brow. "'Deducifying'?"

"Just think it over. We'll be around."

Gustav put on his hat and headed for the door.

"Thanks for consultin' me, brother," I said under my breath as I followed him. "I do so appreciate the faith you put in my good judgment and—"

"Wait."

Old Red peeked over at me, lips twisting into his smug little "Ain't I smart?" smile. He turned to face Bloebaum again.

"Yeah?"

"Prove you mean it," the detective said.

"How?"

Bloebaum held out his hands toward the rickety-looking wicker chairs.

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"A test," he said.

We sat. We listened.

We began our careers as burglars.

Not that Bloebaum described his "test" as burgling. It was "procuring a document that could compromise a client's good standing in the community." Pilfering an illicit love letter, in other words.

"The lady in question knows the gentleman in question wants the letter back," Bloebaum explained. "The lady in question is powerful—and vindictive. If the recovery of the letter is ever linked to me, she could strike back. It would be easy for someone like the lady in question to have someone like *me* squashed like a bug."

"Perhaps through the husband in question?" Old Red said.

Bloebaum nodded. "There is a husband, yes. An important man. Which is why the gentleman in question is so anxious to get the letter back. If the husband should stumble across it . . . disaster."

"What about the thieves in question?" I asked. "Us. How exactly are we gonna steal something when we don't even know who we're supposed to be stealin' it from?"

"I'll tell you how to find the lady in question's home," Bloebaum said. "You'll be able to *recover* the letter from there Sunday morning, when the lady and her husband will be at church—as will I and the gentleman in question."

"Givin' yourselves perfect . . . whaddaya call 'em? Allabees."

"Alibis. Yes. Very good." Bloebaum offered my brother an insinuating smile. "You *do* have the mind of a detective, don't you?"

"Too bad he's completely lost it," I wanted to say. But I held my tongue until Gustav and I were reviewing the day's events over nickel beer at a dive saloon.

"You wanna play Sherlock Holmes? Fine. I'm behind you," I said. "But playin' sneak thief's another thing entirely."

Old Red was hunched over our little table like he might just lay down his head on it and take a nap. "I know. But it's just this once. To prove we got the *cojones* for the work."

I took a pull on my beer, then prodded him with the mug. "How do you *know* it'll be just the once? You ever think about what detectives really do day to day? I know it's the puzzle-bustin' that appeals to you—the Holmesifyin'. But that can't be all there is to the job. There ain't no coin in it. For all we know, snatchin' mash notes back from womenfolk is a workin' detective's bread and butter."

Gustav straightened up and glared at me. "Not for Sherlock Holmes, it wasn't."

I shrugged then—and I apologize to you now, sir, for what I said next.

"You sure 'bout that, brother? We've read what? Eight of Doc

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Watson's stories? For all we know, ol' Holmes was creepin' into ladies' boudoirs all the time to pilfer some—"

"Holmes didn't 'creep' and he didn't 'pilfer,'" Old Red snapped. "He was a gentleman."

I nodded solemnly, knowing I'd gone too far.

"Sure. All right. But what about Bloebaum? What about the Pinkertons?" I shrugged again. "Hell, what about *us?*"

Gustav scooped up his beer and downed a big gulp.

"We're doin' what we gotta do," he growled, slamming the mug back on the table and wiping foam from his moustache. "Mr. Holmes would understand."

You'd know best if that was true, I reckon. Me, I kept my big mouth shut, except to guzzle a couple more beers. And I kept on letting the matter lie through most of the next day. We passed the time cleaning the trail dust from our gear, treating ourselves to shaves and hot baths, and taking a fine-tooth comb to a story in the latest issue of *Harper's Weekly*—"The Reigate Puzzle" by one John Watson.

"Well, you were right," I said after reading it out for the first time.

Old Red had been stretched out on our creaky little flophouse bed, staring at the ceiling as he listened to your tale. He turned toward me looking both aggravated and befuddled, like a man who's been awakened from a nightmare by a kick to the head.

"Right about what?"

"Ol' Holmes got up to a few tricks there, all right, but in the end he rooted out the truth without a single creep or a solitary pilfer," I said. "Yup. I guess that is how a *gentleman* goes about his detectivin'."

"Yeah," Gustav said peevishly. "But did you notice what cracked the mystery open for him in the end?"

I glanced back down at one of the illustrations in the magazine—a reproduction of a torn note from which Holmes claimed he could make twenty-something separate deductions (though he only ladled out a handful in the story).

"I'd say that little slip of paper was the nub of the matter."

"Not just the paper—the writin' on it," Old Red corrected me. "Holmes, he knew what kind of men he was dealin' with just from the way that note was scribbled out."

My brother didn't sound awestruck, as he so often does when speaking of Mr. Holmes's abilities. He sounded miserable. And it wasn't hard to deducify why.

Seeing and thinking—those things Gustav can do as well as anyone (with the exception of Mr. Holmes, of course). But how could he make head or tail from someone's handwriting when he can't even read "A is for apple" printed plain as day in a grade-school primer?

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"Maybe bein' *gentlemen* is a luxury some of us don't have," Gustav grumbled.

"Well, just you don't forget—even Holmes couldn't do everything by hisself," I said. "Why do you think he always wanted Watson taggin' along?"

Old Red made a neutral sort of noise—a growly "Hmmm." Then he rolled onto his back again, his eyes pointed straight up. "Let's hear that story again, huh? And slow down when you get to the part about 'the art of detection' . . ."

I obliged him by reading out "The Reigate Puzzle" again—and by dropping the question of what a proper detective would or wouldn't do. It was Old Red himself who brought the subject up again.

It was Sunday morning, and he was waking me with a shake.

"Time to go. Decent folks are in church by now."

I opened one eye. My brother was leaning over me, already fully dressed.

"So where are the *indecent* folks goin'?" I asked him.

"To work."

"Any chance I could talk 'em out of it?"

"Nope."

I sighed. "Didn't think so."

I reached for my britches.

Once I was decent (or dressed, anyway), we followed Bloebaum's directions to the outskirts of Missoula, where we found the residence of The Lady In Question and her husband. The In Questions lived in a neighborhood that rode the razor's edge between well-to-do and flat-out stinking rich. The homes weren't quite "mansions," yet they surpassed anything as unassuming as a simple "house." Fortunately, there was no one around to wonder what undesirables like ourselves were doing there—the neighborhood was deserted. We passed no one in the streets, and even the dogs, cats, and squirrels seemed to have headed off to church.

Still, Gustav and I did our best to move with casual calm as we approached Casa In Question, affecting the unhurried amble of familiar workmen paying a call to inquire about new yardwork or a box of mislaid tools. Naturally, we'd left our holsters, spurs, and Stetsons back at the boardinghouse, as true tradesmen wouldn't visit a respectable home dressed for a roundup. And naturally, we walked around to the servants' entrance and knocked politely on the door.

Less natural was what we did when no one answered: We retrieved the spare key hidden in a window box and we let ourselves in.

"Hello?" I called out as I closed the door behind us. "Anyone home?"

From somewhere deep in the bowels of the house there came a

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"Yip!" and the tappy-scratchy sound of paws scrambling across floorboards.

"Prince Buster sounds pretty perky today," I said.

Old Red took a few uncertain steps deeper into the house. "Let's hope not *too* perky."

"Prince Buster" was the Dog In Question. We knew about him for the same reason we knew about the key. The Lady In Question's maid wouldn't stoop to thieving, Bloebaum had told us, but somehow selling information to thieves didn't violate her scruples. She'd given the detective the lay of the land, and he'd turned around and laid it on us. We could only assume the maid was praying for forgiveness at that very moment, for she too would be attending services that morning.

Which left it to Prince Buster to defend hearth and home alone. He wouldn't be much defense, we'd been assured, as he was a Great Dane of great, *great* age.

"According to the maid, he's nearly deaf—probably won't even wake up when you come in," Bloebaum had said. "But if he does, don't worry. He's friendly enough with most people, apparently. He's more likely to lick your face than go for your throat."

Nevertheless, my brother and I weren't taking any chances with the prince: In my pocket was a bag of pemmican, which I took out and dumped on the kitchen floor. Hopefully, Buster would prefer dried beef to fresh cowboy.

Old Red and I braced ourselves as the sound of claws on wood came closer. From the high pitch of the *clack-click*s, it sounded like Prince Buster had just had his nails sharpened to needle points.

"I swear to God, Gustav," I said, my fingers hovering over the empty spot on my hip where my holster would usually be hanging, "if that dog kills us, I'll never forgive you."

The *clack-click*s drew ever nearer. My brother and I clustered together by the back door, ready to turn tail and run at the first growl.

When at last the dog appeared, he didn't just growl—he raced forward and lunged at Old Red, practically foaming at the mouth. He sank his teeth into my brother and began thrashing wildly.

I looked down and laughed.

"Well, I'll be," I said. "When Great Danes get old, they *shrink.*"

The dog doing his best to tear my brother limb from limb—and not getting anywhere near succeeding—was all of eight inches tall. He was also a Chihuahua. His head was turned sideways, the better to clamp down on Old Red's boot with his little jaws. One big, black eye stared up at us, full of spite.

"Looks like you bit off more than you can chew, little feller," I said to him.

"Grrrrrorrow," the dog replied.

Gustav lifted up his leg and tried to shake him loose. The Chi-

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huahua wriggled and writhed like a fish on a line, but he wouldn't let go.

"Give him a whiff of pemmican," I suggested.

"Right."

Old Red hobbled over to the bits of jerked meat, the dog dragging along behind him, fighting his every step.

"Go on," my brother said. "Get you some beef, you little bastard."

But the Chihuahua still preferred the taste of boot leather to pemmican, and he wouldn't let go. Perhaps I could've loosened him with a kick or two, but my brother and I share a soft-heartedness when it comes to all animals other than cows, sheep, chickens, and bankers. We'd no sooner kick a dog than we'd brand a baby.

"Look, you can still walk, even with that furry spur at your heel," I pointed out. "Let's just move this along, huh? I wanna get outta here."

Gustav hung his head as if saying a silent prayer for strength.

"Grrrrorrowrrowrrow," the dog said.

Old Red sighed.

"Come on."

He headed for the hallway.

It was a fine, fancy house decorated with fine, fancy things, but I didn't pause to admire any of the fine fanciness. I was mesmerized by that dog. He stayed stuck to my brother's boot all the way down the hall and up the stairs.

"That is one scrappy mutt," I said as Gustav limped into the first room at the top of the stairs—the master bedroom, Bloebaum had told us. "He just doesn't know when to give up, does he? Kinda reminds me of you like that."

"Well, hell," my brother grumbled.

I followed him (and the Chihuahua) into the bedroom.

"What's the . . . ? Oh."

Before us was what you'd expect to see in a bedroom: namely, a bed. But we'd been expecting *beds,* his and hers, with a table in between them. The letter would be in a jewelry box in the top drawer.

With only one bed, of course, there's no "in between." And there was no table, either. Not like the one Bloebaum had described.

"Sweet Jesus," I said. "We're in the wrong house."

Old Red shook his head. "The key was where it was supposed to be. The stairs and the bedroom, too."

He took a few more steps into the room and started to bend down to inspect the floor on his knees, Holmes-style.

"I wouldn't do that if I was you." I gave the seat of my jeans a pat. "I bet it's bad enough havin' that pesky S.O.B. clamped to your *boot."*

My brother stared down sourly.

"Grrrrrrrrrrr," the dog said.

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"Grrrrrrrrrrr," Old Red said.

"Look, the table's not here, so the letter's not here," I said. "So why are *we* still here?"

"'Cuz the table *was* here." Gustav pointed to the right of the bed, at the carpet covering the floor. The plush fabric had been dimpled here and there with small, circular grooves—the kind bed legs and a table would make. "Only question is, where is it now?"

He stalked out to the hallway as quick as he could with his little caboose. He checked the next room (a linen closet) and the next (an indoor w.c.) before he muttered the words that told me he'd found what he was looking for.

"Well, hel-lo. . . ."

The missing bed and table were squeezed into what looked like a disused sewing room down the hall. My brother moved to the bed table, pulled out the top drawer, and produced a long, flat box of dark mahogany. The letter was inside, folded in thirds and perched boldly atop The Lady In Question's glittering gewgaws.

"Looks like we did it," I said without much enthusiasm. "Bloebaum's got him a couple apprentice detectives now."

"Yeah . . . I suppose," Old Red mumbled. He picked up the letter gingerly, pinching one corner betwixt thumb and forefinger as if it was something he didn't wish to sully—or it was something that might sully *him*. "The lady sure ain't shy about her two-timin', is she?"

"Don't appear so," I said. "Every time she went to pretty herself up with her baubles, there was that letter sittin' there."

"Yup. Seems like the mister'd be bound to notice it sooner or later . . ."

My brother's eyes lost their focus, staring at everything and nothing the way they do when his gaze turns inward. Something didn't sit right. Something, in fact, jumped up and down very *wrong*.

Before either of us could say just what, though, our resident ankle-biter let loose of Gustav and tore out of the room, barking at full blast.

Old Red grimaced. "That can't be good."

And it wasn't, for the next thing we heard was the jangling clatter of a key in a lock followed by the squeak of an opening door.

" . . . don't mind missing that idiot minister blathering away," a man's voice rumbled down in the foyer. "And we left before the offertory, thank God. But couldn't you even wait till we were standing for a hymn or something? To just jump up and—"

A woman said something in reply, but she spoke too softly for us to hear her clearly over the Chihuahua's frantic yapping.

"Fine. Run off to your little hidey-hole, then," the man snarled. "Stay there all day, if you wish. You'll be sparing me a . . . *Christ*, Tubby! Would you *please* shut up!"

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Tubby—the dog, presumably—went right on barking.

"A Chihuahua. A Chihuahua!" The man spat out an oath so foul I could practically smell it. "We finally get a chance to own a good, red-blooded *American* dog, but oh no! You had to have a Chihuahua! I swear, I don't know which is going to drive me crazy first, Cassandra—you or that little popeyed freak! Maybe that's what you want! It would explain so much! You're *trying* to drive me mad, aren't you?"

"Why should I waste my time, Orville?" Cassandra snapped back, the sound of her quick footsteps echoing up the stairway. "You've already done an admirable job of it yourself."

"Why, you miserable bitch!"

I'm sure there was more—and worse. Thankfully, my brother and I were no longer around to hear it. Instead, we were dropping one by one from the window in the w.c.

We had to hope neither Orville nor Cassandra heard the call of nature before we could make our escape, for of course there was no way to close the window behind us. We had to hope, too, that they didn't hear the thuds, *oof*s, and mumbled curses occasioned by our long drops into the rosebushes lining the back of the house.

"You know what I wish right now?" I whispered hoarsely as I peeled a long, thorn-covered stem from my posterior. "I wish we were goddamn *gentlemen.*"

"We best get to runnin'," Old Red groaned, pushing himself off the freshly decapitated garden cherub that had broken his fall (though not, by some miracle, his ankles). "The lady might've worn some of her trinkets to church . . . and ol' Orville, he might be hungry."

The letter was in my brother's pocket.

The pemmican was still spread across the kitchen floor.

Our horses were stabled a half-mile away.

We ran.

Three hours later, we were sauntering—moseying into Bloebaum's office at the appointed hour, laboring to look as relaxed as a couple of swells out for a Sunday stroll in the park. Bloebaum was still in his church duds, hair slicked back, moustache freshly waxed. He goggled at us nervously as we came in but managed to wait until the door was closed to spit out his "So?"

Gustav brought out the letter and gave it a waggle.

Bloebaum sighed and smiled simultaneously. "I was worried. The lady in question and the gentleman in question attend the same church. Apparently, she was so upset when she saw him this morning, she left the service early."

"Not early enough to catch us," I said.

"Excellent." Bloebaum held out his hand. "And now, if you please . . ."

Old Red shook his head.

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"We don't please," I said. "Not without a guarantee, anyway."

Bloebaum's smile wilted. "A guarantee?"

I nodded. "In writin'. A month's trial employment for both of us . . . at two dollars a day."

"That wasn't our agreement," Bloebaum said coldly.

My brother slipped the letter back into his pocket.

"Well, once we gave it some thought, our old agreement didn't seem so agreeable anymore," I said. "Your client'll be payin' *you* when it was *us* who stuck our necks out. So we figure we've earned us a better deal. 'Course, if we don't get it . . . well, there won't be much to keep us around Missoula. We'll just slip that letter back under the lady's door and ride off to—"

"Wait."

The detective's eyes were so ablaze Gustav could've used them to light his pipe. All the same, he smiled, his grin bitter yet admiring—a bow to a worthy opponent.

"You two are a lot sharper than you look. All right. Why not put you on the payroll?"

He leaned forward and got to scribbling on a scrap of paper on his desk, reading his words aloud as he wrote.

"I agree to pay Arthur and August Amblingmayer . . ." (Neither Gustav nor I bothered correcting him.) ". . . two dollars a day each for a term of employment of not less than thirty days. Signed, William J. Bloebaum."

He completed his signature with a flourish and thrust the note out toward me. I stepped up to take it, then moved back a few paces to stand with my brother.

"Now," Bloebaum said. "The letter."

Old Red handed it over—to *me.* I snapped the paper open with a flick of the wrist and held it up next to Bloebaum's "guarantee."

"What are you doing? Give me that at once!" Bloebaum thundered. "You have no right to read it! It belongs to my client!"

I looked over at my brother and nodded.

"Who just happens to be *you,"* Old Red said to Bloebaum. *"You're* 'the gentleman in question.'"

"Except you ain't much of a gent," I threw in. "Are you, 'Billy Boy'?"

Bloebaum didn't answer—not with words, anyway. He just sank into his chair, going so limp it looked like he was about to drape himself over it like a sheet.

"It struck me as mighty peculiar, the maid not mentionin' that the lady'd got herself a new dog . . . and had moved out of the master bedroom to boot," Gustav said. "It seemed like whoever was passin' along the skinny on the lady's house hadn't actually been there in weeks. But why the lie about a tattlin' maid?—unless it was *you* who'd been in that house. *You* who'd been carryin' on with the lady."

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Bloebaum had looked up, his eyes wide, when Old Red mentioned the lady's room switch. But as my brother went on, the detective hunched over and put his head in his hands.

"'Course, I couldn't be sure, so we took us a look at that letter 'fore we came over here. You didn't sign your name to it, but I assume the lady's husband could piece together who 'Your Darling Billy Boy' was if *he* was to see it. Me, I needed some other kinda proof. I don't know much about handwritin' . . . hell, I can't even *do* it. But fortunately—"

"The *l*'s in 'Billy' and 'dollars' and 'William' is what really gave you away," I told Bloebaum. "Even when you're writin' cursive, you make your double *l*'s with just two straight lines."

Gustav gave me an approving nod. "Good eye, brother."

"Why, thank you, brother."

Bloebaum finally looked up at us again. "Cassandra . . . the lady. You say she's in her own bedroom now?"

"Yup," Old Red said. "I don't know if it's got anything to do with that letter, though. Maybe the husband noticed it, maybe not. I reckon she gave him every chance to see it, though."

"Oh yes. That she did," Bloebaum mumbled miserably. "It's one of the ways they torture each other—leaving around little hints of their indiscretions. She showed me where she was keeping my letter. She thought it was funny. I didn't. If it ever came out that I'd betrayed a client—"

"Whoa," I broke in. "Client?"

"Oh, Mr. Bloebaum," Old Red said, shaking his head with doleful reproach. "The husband hired you?"

Bloebaum nodded reluctantly, shamefaced, like a schoolgirl caught passing notes. "He's preparing a case for divorce. He needs solid proof that Cassandra's committed adultery. He hired me to get it. It was the first decent job to come my way since I left the Pinkertons."

"'Left'?" Gustav said, cocking an eyebrow.

Bloebaum cleared his throat. "Was asked to leave," he muttered.

"Well, I reckon you got the proof the husband wanted," I said. "You just picked a hell of a way to go about it."

Bloebaum shrugged lethargically, as if he could barely muster the energy to lift his shoulders. "I couldn't help it. Following a woman, watching her . . . it can bewitch a man. Eventually, I approached her, told her what her husband was up to. She . . ." He cleared his throat and shifted his gaze downward, to an empty spot atop his desk. "She made me a counteroffer. I broke it off last month, when I finally realized what a fool I'd been. But it's been eating me alive ever since. That letter—it could destroy me. I couldn't work up the nerve to get it back myself, though. Prince Buster hated me. It wouldn't surprise me if one of Cassandra's other beaux finally poisoned the big . . ."

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A piece of paper fluttered through the air and settled onto the desk before Bloebaum.

"Take it," Old Red said. "Makes my hands feel dirty just holdin' the thing."

Bloebaum snatched up the letter, clutching it tight in trembling hands. He gazed at my brother in wonderment a moment . . . before ripping the paper into a hundred pieces. When he was done, he sighed contentedly, then looked back over at us.

"Thank you. Truly. But . . . I'm sorry. I really can't afford to hire you. Not with—"

Gustav barked out a scoffing laugh.

"Mister, if you think we'd still wanna work for the likes of you, you're as dumb as you are dishonest," I said.

As we headed for the door, I did to Bloebaum's "guarantee" what he'd done to his love letter.

"Well," I said once we were outside again, "what now?"

"You know what now."

I crooked a thumb back at Bloebaum's office. "That don't give you second thoughts about detectivin' for a livin'?"

Old Red scowled at me like I'd just asked if he had second thoughts as to the sky being blue or the grass green. "Bloebaum there might've been a disappointment, but our Holmesifyin'—that came through again, didn't it?"

"I suppose so," I said, surprised to hear my brother mention *our* Holmesifying. He usually speaks of Holmes as something that belongs to him alone. "We did get things untangled . . . eventually. . . ."

Old Red nodded firmly. "There you go, then."

And that was that. His faith remained unshaken.

Or maybe I shouldn't call it "faith," since that's something you're supposed to hold to in lieu of proof. And we've seen proof aplenty, because we've put Holmes's methods to the test time and time again, and they haven't failed yet.

We still haven't found jobs as detectives—or run across anyone who could hold a candle to Holmes. But that doesn't mean your friend's flame has flickered out. You helped it burn all the brighter when he was alive, I have no doubt, and you're keeping it ablaze today with your stories. I wouldn't be so presumptuous as to say the torch has been passed to my brother and me, but I will say this: We've seen the light.

For that, we both thank you.

Sincerely,

O.A. Amlingmeyer
Coeur d'Alene, Idaho
June 21, 1893

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A Bird in the Sand

by Edward D. Hoch

Edward D. Hoch's professional couriers Stanton and Ives are off to a bird sanctuary in Arizona in the following new episode in their series. The research Mr. Hoch does for this and other series is truly astonishing—especially when one considers that he has written nearly 950 published stories, and *many* of them have exotic or historical settings. His writing has made him an accomplished "armchair" traveler, with only his home library to guide him. ¶

The fact that Ives and I were flying west with a large white cockatoo didn't mean we were saving on air fare. We were on a commercial airliner along with the bird, who seemed notably unimpressed to have a seat to itself with the seatbelt fastened snugly around its cage. Mrs. Wineworth had insisted that the bird make the trip with the human passengers rather than be consigned to a dark and chilly baggage compartment, and we'd tried three airlines before we found one that would allow it.

So the cockatoo, whose name was Eddy, sat between Ives and me in row five, a drape over its cage to keep it from chattering away to the other passengers. "I've had Eddy since my husband died twelve years ago," Mrs. Wineworth had explained that day in our little office on Broadway at 12th Street. "But these days I have enough trouble caring for myself. They tell me Eddy could live to be fifty years old, and I'll be long gone by then. I want to know he'll be looked after when I'm gone. I hear there's a place in Arizona. . . ."

Indeed there was a place in Arizona, more than one, in fact. We were heading for the Mission Bird Sanctuary, southwest of Tucson, where a small group of dedicated folks had established a community for rare tropical birds in a former mission church. Mrs. Wineworth wasn't about to entrust her beloved Eddy to a package delivery company, so she came to Stanton & Ives.

"I don't like it," Juliet Ives grumbled. "We've never had to transport a live creature before."

"It's only a bird," I reminded her, dismissing the complaint. "If you weren't so finicky you could have done it alone while I stayed

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in Manhattan drumming up new business."

We left the plane at the Tucson airport with the temperature over ninety and Ives carrying the birdcage. I'd arranged for a rental car to take us over the dusty back roads to the mission. We headed out Route 86 with the cockatoo in the backseat. He'd stayed quiet for most of the trip, but once we turned onto the rutted dirt road near San Pedro he started squawking. "Hello . . . what happened? . . . cracker."

"Give him a cracker, Ives," I suggested, "but don't let him nip your fingers."

"Easy for you to say!"

After twenty minutes of driving through a desert region of cactuses and mesquites the old mission loomed ahead of us on the horizon. "There's smoke off to the west," I observed. "It's been a dry summer here, with some brush fires."

The sandy soil supported little vegetation and it was hard to imagine there was enough brush to burn. Ives studied the smoke and said, "I doubt if it'll reach the mission. Don't they fly over and bomb those things with water or something?"

We pulled into a parking area in front of the mission, next to a sign that read: *Mission Bird Sanctuary—Visitors Welcome.* Already we could hear the chattering from within, and before we were out of the car we were greeted by a petite young woman in khaki shorts and a parrot T-shirt. "How're you all? I'm Rosie Spain. Come on in!"

"We're not exactly visitors," I told her. "I'm Walt Stanton and this is Juliet Ives. We phoned you—"

"Of course! You're the courier service." Her face seemed to glow with anticipation. "Where's our new arrival?"

Ives lifted the covered cage from the backseat. "Right here. He's Eddy and he's all yours."

Rosie Spain peered beneath the cloth and grinned. "Eddy is just lovely. I think cockatoos are my favorite of all our birds. Those movable head crests are divine."

The chattering from within had grown in volume, as if the inhabitants were greeting a new arrival. "How do you live with that racket all the time?" Ives asked.

"We love it. Come on in, I'll show you around."

We followed her through the front door, which led directly into the old mission church. The statues had been removed, leaving only bare niches in the walls, and in place of the altar there was a large screened aviary that held perhaps fifty small birds. A young man was spraying it with mist from a garden hose. "Charles, come see our new cockatoo," the woman called to him.

He turned off the hose and came over to meet us. "Charles Cromwell," he said, shaking my hand.

"Walt Stanton." I introduced Ives and she held up the cage.

Cromwell was properly impressed. "A white delight! Why would

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anyone want to get rid of a beautiful bird like this?"

"Mrs. Wineworth is too old to take care of him, and she's had a stroke," Ives explained. "He got loose from his cage and she had to call a neighbor in to help catch him. She heard about this place from a friend and it sounded like a perfect retirement home for Eddy."

Rosie Spain nodded. "We get a lot like that, but not usually from the East Coast." She motioned toward the aviary. "We have a bigger one outside, behind the mission, but with all that smoke from the fires we thought we'd better keep them in today."

The chatter was building again and I had to speak louder to make myself heard. "How many birds do you have?"

"Over five hundred. They're mostly tropical birds like cockatoos, macaws, and parrots, but we have roosters and geese, too—and even a flock of racing pigeons someone gave us. Our entire operation is supported by donations."

"There can't be many of your birds larger than this cockatoo," I said.

Cromwell grinned. "We have a macaw over three feet long. I'll show him to you later."

The smaller rooms in the mission were given over to rows of large cages with pairs of birds in each. "Parrots are usually monogamous," Rosie explained. "We try to find new companions for ones who've lost a mate."

The chattering was getting too much for Ives. "Can't you do something about all this noise?"

Rosie simply stared at her. "If you cut their vocal cords, that would be inhumane."

"Sorry, I didn't quite mean that," Ives said, retreating a bit.

Cromwell interrupted them. "You've come a long way. At least stay for dinner with us and meet the others."

Our plane back wasn't till morning and the hotel room near the airport would be waiting for us whenever we arrived. There was no reason to decline. They ate early, at five-thirty, with another woman named Elsie preparing the meal of light Mexican food. "We take turns," she explained to us. "Charlie wouldn't have invited you if it was his night to cook."

"Oh, come on, Elsie! I was busy with the pigeons all afternoon."

I counted seven chairs at the table, so I wasn't surprised when two other men joined us. The older one, Miles Beach, turned out to be married to Elsie, our cook of the day. The other one, younger and handsomer, was Keith Naco. He was Mexican-American, apparently employed as a handyman who also helped with the birds. He was the one who brought us bad news. "The fire's crossed the road," he told Ives and me. "We're in no danger here, but you may not be able to leave until morning."

Ives all but groaned at the news. "Do the birds chatter like that all night?"

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Cromwell chuckled. "No, Miss Ives. When we cover their cages they go to sleep like everyone else."

"I hope they don't make a lot of noise when they're mating."

"We don't encourage that. We certainly don't need more birds here. In fact, if one of them lays an egg, we take it and replace it with a ceramic egg."

"That's mean," Ives said and dug into her Mexican dinner.

"We have an extra bed," Rosie Spain told us later, "if you don't mind sleeping together."

"We'll manage," Ives replied.

The extra bed was narrow and a bit hard, but as Ives said, we managed.

I was awakened early by the cackling of a rooster and the strong odor of smoke. Hurrying to the window, I could see the fire still burning below us on the hill. "Come back to bed," Ives mumbled.

"That fire seems closer."

"Come back to bed."

"I'd better get dressed and see what's up."

"You just want to get another look at Rosie's legs in those shorts."

I shook my head. "They're too muscular for me. You've got nothing to worry about."

It was just eight o'clock when I made my way downstairs to the mission refectory and found Elsie Beach trying to get through on the telephone. "The wires must be down," she said. "I can't get a dial tone."

"Don't worry. Ives and I both have cell phones with us."

"We've got a couple here, too. I just wanted to alert the firefighters that it's getting a bit close."

"I'd better take a look."

"Those steps lead to the bell tower, the best view around. Charles is up there now with his pigeons. They're his responsibility."

I climbed the stone steps, worn down by countless Spanish monks before me. But the mission bells were long gone. Cromwell was just setting free a flight of pigeons when I reached the top. "Are you racing them?" I asked.

"Yeah, just for fun, to keep them in condition. They're homing pigeons, trained to fly back and forth between their bases. I fly these to Phoenix every day if the weather's good. The other staffers don't pay much attention to them."

"And they always come back?"

"Always. Some have been recorded as flying over fifteen hundred miles, but I limit mine to the two hundred fifty miles or so to Phoenix and back."

"How fast do they fly?"

"Around thirty miles an hour or a bit more."

I glanced down the other way at the brush fire. The smoke had

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shifted direction and was blowing away from us. "Looks like it's dying down," I observed.

"Yeah. Elsie was in a panic, but we're safe enough here. There's just lots of sand around the mission and that's not going to burn."

"You get a great view from up here."

"Damn right! If it wasn't for that smoke you could see almost all the way to Mexico. It's only about sixty-five miles away."

We went back downstairs to find Elsie and Rosie Spain. Charles asked where Elsie's husband Miles was.

"Still sleeping, I guess," she answered indifferently. "Have you seen him, Rosie?"

I sensed a certain tension between the women at her words, and it wasn't dispelled by Rosie's answer. "I imagine he slept better than you did."

A couple of parrots in the next room suddenly started chattering and that was enough to set off the whole place again. Ives came down to breakfast with her hair still mussed from sleep and looking unhappy. "There's a big ugly pig or something outside the window."

Somehow her words served to break the building tension between the women. Rosie Spain laughed. "That's a javelina, a wild boar. They're quite common around here."

Elsie Beach agreed. "Our birds don't seem to mind them. Coyotes and bobcats are more of a problem, but we have a couple of dogs to keep them away."

Ives looked at her watch. "We'll miss our plane!"

"I'll call them and get us changed to a later flight," I said. "It looks like the fire is dying down."

Keith Naco came in with a big green-winged bird that I recognized as a macaw. "This one's got an injured wing but I think he'll be okay. You women can patch him up. Is breakfast ready?"

It was Elsie who answered. "Today's Rosie's turn. Ask her."

Rosie was at the stove now, in her khaki shorts, breaking eggs into a frying pan. "It'll be ready soon. Where *is* Miles?"

"Don't *you* know?" Elsie countered. "We've been sleeping in separate rooms, in case you hadn't noticed."

Rosie flipped over the eggs. "I wasn't with him last night." She turned to Naco. "Go see if Miles is still asleep."

Ives just shook her head. "How could anyone sleep with all this bird chatter?"

"We get used to it."

Keith Naco was back before she finished the eggs. "Something's happened to Miles," he told us, a bit short of breath. "You'd better come."

We crowded after him into the back bedroom, a large room overlooking the sandy hillside. Miles Beach seemed especially small in the large double bed, and to me it looked like the smallness of death. I'd seen it before. I started to turn him over and saw the

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blood, and knew that he'd been murdered.

Cromwell used a cell phone to call the state police, but was told there were trees down over the road and it might be evening before they could reach us. Ives and I were all too aware that we were trapped in this place with four other people, one of them a killer. "He or she will kill us all by that time, Stanton," she told me later when we were alone. "How did we get into this mess, anyway?"

"We delivered a bird, remember?"

"As soon as the police get that road open we're leaving."

"They might have other ideas about that," I reminded her. "We're suspects along with the rest of them."

The police had told us to touch nothing at the crime scene, but that was easier said than done. The old mission church had no air conditioning and with the temperature heading toward a hundred degrees, we could already sense an unpleasant odor of decay in the air. It was Keith Naco who came up with a temporary solution. In their storeroom they had a large roll of heavy plastic sheeting for covering the outdoor aviaries in the event of windstorms or rare winter frosts. He suggested we wrap the entire bed and its grisly occupant in plastic sheeting, thereby preserving the crime scene while cutting down on the odor. It seemed as good an idea as any, and I helped him with it while Ives watched.

"I'll wrap the head," I volunteered while Naco worked at the bottom of the bed.

"Do you think he was shot?"

"No one heard anything, and it looks more like a stab wound, but that's for the medical examiner to decide." I'd lifted the head as I spoke and Beach's mouth came open. There was something metallic in it. I cupped my hand to remove it without Naco noticing my action. Then we pulled the sheeting taut and taped it to the legs of the bed. "That'll help some," I said.

"What's the story with the two women?" Ives wanted to know when we'd finished. "They're almost at each other's throats."

Keith Naco shrugged as if it was no big deal. "One man, two women. I guess the problem's solved now that he's dead."

"You think one of them killed him?"

"Maybe, unless it was Cromwell—or one of you two." He smiled when he said it, so I let it pass.

He went off to check on the birds and I walked out to the front of the mission with Ives. The fire in this region was nearly out and we could see men working to clear away some thorny mesquite trees and burst cactuses that still blocked the dirt road. "We'll be out of here in an hour," Ives predicted.

"The police will be here in an hour," I corrected. "That doesn't mean we can get in our car and sail off to the airport. They'll have a lot of questions to ask."

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"What were you doing with his body? It looked like you took something out of his mouth."

I reached into my pocket and took out the small tube I'd found. "It's very light, probably aluminum. I can't imagine what he was using it for."

"Snorting cocaine," Ives suggested, "instead of rolling up a fifty-dollar bill."

"Maybe."

"You should have left it where it was."

"He may have been hiding it from his killer. At least it's safer with us."

It was just after noon when we went back to the kitchen to find Rosie Spain fixing sandwiches for everyone. "I figured we should fortify ourselves before the police get here," she explained.

"Where are the rest of them?" I asked.

"Keith and Elsie are feeding the birds and Charles is up in the tower guiding his pigeons back from Phoenix."

We went out back to visit Eddy, who seemed to be adjusting well to all these strange noisy birds. Presently Cromwell came to join us, sandwich in hand. "I guess the road is clear. The police just drove up. Rosie sent me to tell you."

"Thanks," I said. "Your pigeons all get back safely?"

"Every one. They made good time."

We followed him inside to meet Sergeant Menos, who wore a cowboy hat and a sport shirt with his badge pinned to the breast pocket. "You people all work here?" he asked. I explained that Ives and I were couriers employed to deliver a cockatoo to the sanctuary. He shoved the hat back a few inches on his balding head. "You mean those New Yorkers got that much money to throw around?"

"Some of them do," Ives told him. "The woman wanted to be sure Eddy had a good life after she was gone."

"Eddy?"

"The cockatoo."

"Oh." He shook his head and turned to Rosie. "You in charge here?"

"I guess you could say that. I founded the place and I keep things running."

"Let's see the body."

Elsie Beach had reappeared with Naco and by unspoken agreement she led the way into the bedroom. "His name's Miles Beach," she told the detective. "He was my husband."

"How'd he get all wrapped up in plastic?"

I explained that we'd done it because of the heat. "We didn't know how long it would take you to get here."

He instructed the two detectives who'd accompanied him to carefully remove the plastic. When they started their routine of photographing and crime scene investigation, Menos ordered us from the room. "I'll be questioning you individually, but first I

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want to hear where everyone was last night, starting with you, Mrs. Beach."

We'd gone out to the common room adjoining the refectory and grouped around in a haphazard semicircle while Sergeant Menos asked his questions. He led off with a question for Elsie: "Did you spend the night with your husband, Mrs. Beach?"

"I . . . no, I hadn't slept with him for more than two weeks. I'd been sleeping in our guest room. Since we had unexpected guests last night," she glanced at Ives and me, "I slept on a cot down here."

"I didn't know we were taking your bed," I said by way of apology.

"Why weren't you sleeping with him?" the detective asked, making some notes.

"You might want to ask Rosie that question. It's hard to fit three in a bed."

The detective turned to Rosie Spain. "Did you spend the night with the victim?"

"No," she answered simply, avoiding Elsie's gaze. "I was alone."

Menos turned to the two men. "What about you two?"

"I was alone," Cromwell told him, "and I heard nothing."

"The dogs were restless," Naco said. "I figured there might be a bobcat nearby."

"Were you sleeping alone?"

"Of course!"

Then Sergeant Menos turned his attention to us. "You two were together all night?"

"Yes," I replied.

"Married?"

"Engaged," I told him, and felt Ives drill me with her eyes.

At that moment the chattering of the outside birds seemed to increase and the dogs started barking. "They've got something," Rosie said, rising to go look.

"Maybe one of my men. I told him to take a look around the grounds."

We headed for the aviary out back and found one of the sergeant's uniformed men tussling with an obvious border-crosser, a young Mexican who spoke virtually no English. "I found him hiding in this shed," the officer told Menos.

The detective spoke quickly in Spanish to his prisoner. When the young man was slow to answer, Menos poked him none too gently in the stomach and asked more questions. Finally the frightened youth began to talk and Menos translated for us. "His name in Garcia Ortega. He's from Mexico City and he crossed over near Sasabe three nights ago. He was starving and when he heard the birds he sneaked in here to kill one and eat it, but the dogs chased him into your supply shed."

Rosie smiled. "Nothing but bird food in there. Come on, I'll feed him before you take him back."

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"Maybe he got into the house and killed my husband," Elsie Beach suggested.

"If he'd done that he certainly would have grabbed something to eat," Ives argued with some logic. One of the nearby parrots cackled something in Spanish, mimicking Menos and his prisoner.

I glanced into the shed, searching for something that might have been used as a weapon, but found nothing. The shelves were lined with carefully labeled sacks of bird food and treats, some marked "macaws, cockatoos, and parrots," others marked "pigeons only," still others "roosters and geese." There were even some of the ceramic eggs Cromwell had mentioned at dinner.

"Look at this," Ives said as we passed one of the mission's atriums. She stooped down and pulled a metal spike from the ground. It was the sort used to anchor netting for the aviaries, but its pointed tip could easily double as a murder weapon.

"Bring it along. They might be able to match it to the shape of the wound."

We gave it to Menos and he said since we were outsiders here and unlikely to have a motive for the killing we were free to go. When I phoned the airline about our missed flight I was told there was nothing else available to New York until the following afternoon. "You mean we're stuck here for another twenty-four hours?" Ives said with a bit of a groan.

"Looks like it. We'll have more time to bond with Eddy."

"Rosie says we shouldn't socialize too much with the birds. She wants them to have bird friends for their old age, not people."

"Miles Beach would have been better off with bird friends, too."

"If we put our minds to this, Stanton, we could probably wrap it up before we have to leave."

"Maybe," I acknowledged.

We asked Rosie if we could remain one more night rather than get a hotel room in Tucson and she readily agreed. It was bad enough we had to pay for the unoccupied room the night before. "Perhaps your courier company would like to make a donation to our sanctuary," she suggested.

"I'll talk to the boss about it when we get back."

The illegal, Garcia Ortega, had been taken away by the police, along with the body, but I don't think any of them believed that was the end of it. Our evening meal was tense, made worse by the fact that Naco had placed seven chairs around the table, forgetting for a moment that Miles Beach wouldn't be joining us. "Do you want help with the funeral arrangements, Elsie?" Cromwell asked as they were finishing dinner.

"I don't even want to think about that. It was so good here at first. The birds made it seem like paradise. Then something happened." No one had to say what it was. Rosie got up and started clearing away the dishes.

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Ives and I were up early, packing our small bags for a quick escape. We had breakfast with Rosie and Keith Naco at eight, while Cromwell was on the roof launching his pigeons on their daily flight. "Where's Elsie?" Ives asked.

"She'll be down," Naco replied. "She's leaving today, too. She told me she can't stay here any longer."

Rosie Spain was silent for a moment, then said, "I hope she doesn't blame me. I had nothing to do with his death." It had been Miles's turn to cook the meals, but Rosie had worked a second day rather than ask anyone else.

Naco was already out feeding the birds when Cromwell came down to help him. He'd fed the dozen or so homing pigeons already, before they took off for Phoenix on their daily run. "How'd they end up here?" Ives asked when we'd joined them outside. "They're hardly tropical birds."

"Their owner died and the flock was going to be split up. I knew about Rosie's place so I brought them here last winter. They were young enough to train for new routes, using more experienced birds, and when Rosie offered me a job I took it."

Each of them had their own chores and for a time we walked with Elsie. If her husband's death upset her, she wasn't showing it. "This is the last time I'll be feeding the birds. I guess I'll miss them, but Miles was the one who brought us here. He loved all birds and never wanted to see them mistreated. Sometimes he talked about starting a place like this back East." We'd stopped at the macaws' cages and she filled their feeders with seed, then poured fresh water into their dishes. A green and red parrot pecked at Elsie's finger when it got the chance. "They like to peck you with those big beaks," she said, quickly withdrawing her finger.

We left her and drifted over to Eddy's cage, the same one in which we'd delivered him. Rosie hadn't yet paired him with a bird companion. Ives was wearing high heels in preparation for our return flight to New York, and one heel sank into the loose gravel nearby. She bent to free it and said, "Stanton, look at this!"

"What is it?"

"Looks like birdseed to me."

"Someone must have spilled it."

She dug a bit with her hand. "But there's lots of it, several inches. And it was covered over by a couple inches of sand. If someone spilled it, they could have shoveled up most of it and used it."

"It does seem odd," I admitted. Very odd, and I couldn't quite come up with an explanation. It wasn't till noon, when we'd brought our bags down to the car, that everything suddenly fell into place.

"I think we should take Eddy to the top of the tower before we leave, so he can get a bird's-eye view," I told Ives.

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"A bird's-eye view? He's a *bird,* Stanton!"

"Come on. It'll only take a few minutes." We went around the back and Ives picked up his cage. Then I led the way up the steps to the mission tower.

Charles Cromwell was standing there, as I knew he would be, scanning the southern horizon with a pair of binoculars. "Hello. I thought you people would be gone by now."

"We wanted to give Eddy a bird's-eye view," I told him. "You watching for your pigeons?"

"Yeah."

I smiled at him. "I thought Phoenix was in the other direction, but then my geography's always been bad."

"Sometimes the birds circle around before they land."

"My geography's always been bad, but my math is damned good. Phoenix is a hundred and twenty miles away and the homing pigeons fly about thirty miles an hour. That means four hours up and four hours back, but they returned at noon yesterday and you're expecting them at noon today. That's only four hours round trip, about as far as Mexico and back."

Right on cue, the flock appeared from the south, heading straight for the tower. Cromwell seemed to try waving them away, but it was too late. "What do you want?" he asked me.

"The truth. I found this tube in Beach's mouth. He must have hidden it there when you started attacking him."

"What is it?"

"You should know. Every one of those homing pigeons has one taped to its leg. They're tubes for carrying messages, but with the ends taped shut they're a perfect method for transporting narcotics across the border. Only an ounce or two per bird, but with a dozen birds flying every day it adds up. What is it, heroin?"

Cromwell grabbed the first pigeon to land and removed the tube from its leg. "Whatever brings the best price. Sometimes it's pills."

"Miles Beach became suspicious of your short flights, found one of the tubes, and threatened to turn you in. He couldn't stand to see you using birds for drug smuggling. That's why you killed him."

"You expect anyone will believe that?" he asked with a grin.

"They will when they find your stash of drugs. You emptied a sack of pigeon feed and buried it, so you could use the sack to store the daily shipments till you had enough to sell. It'll be in one of those sacks of pigeon feed, because the pigeons are your responsibility."

Cromwell was still smiling as he pulled the metal spike from his pocket and lunged at me. He might have reached me if Eddy hadn't landed on his arm and pecked at his hand with his powerful beak.

"I let him out of his cage," Ives said later. "I hope that was all right." ❂

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The Golden Fool

by Margaret Lawrence

"But I *must* see it again, *ma dame!*" cried Eleanor, who would one day be Duchess of Aquitaine, and queen of France and of England. "This time I shall pin it on! Yes?"

Duke William's eldest daughter had reached her twelfth year in February of 1134, and the older she got, the more she expected to command. "Jehane," she ordered her grandmother's grey-haired maid, "fetch me *le Fou d'Or.* At once!"

"Yes, quick, quick! The Golden Fool!" simpered her little sister, Petronille, who was not quite eleven. If Eleanor wanted a favor, she demanded it or took it. Petronille, who would never be Duchess, simpered and begged, and grew sly.

Margaret Lawrence has a doctorate in medieval English drama and has taught at several colleges in the Midwest. She is also a playwright whose plays have been performed at the New York Shakespeare Festival Public Theatre. In 1996, her novel *Hearts and Bones* launched a mystery series set in Revolutionary War-era Maine and earned nominations for four awards. Most of her mysteries are historical, like this one starring Eleanor of Aquitaine.

The two girls, like a pair of bright, noisy parrots, surged round their grandmother's elegant circular parlor in the great Maubergeonne Tower of the palace at Poitiers. Perched in the embrasure of the window overlooking the River Clain, the lady Coustance and the lady Marielle, the old countess's prune-faced waiting women, exchanged knowing glances. The Golden Fool might be worth thousands of *deniers,* but it was notoriously obscene in its design, and it was highly indiscreet of the old woman to let Lady Eleanor handle it, or even see it. Though she was now of marriageable age, the girl was, after all, still a maiden.

The ladies made their prim excuses and hurried out, all but overturning a harp and an embroidery frame in their haste to report to Duke William. "Spies," the countess hissed under her breath, and shattered a priceless rock-crystal vase with her walking stick.

Her name was Dangereuse and she lived up to it, even in the matter of ornament. The great brooch called the Golden Fool had a

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history as scandalous as her own, and for that very reason it was dear to her. Many years ago, she had tempted Eleanor's grandsire, the old Duke, away from his boring wife, and he had come in the night and stolen Dangereuse from her own boring husband, riding off with her clasped in his arms. When they reached Poitiers, he had given her a golden cloak pin shaped like a tumbling fool and set with rubies and pearls in the most voluptuous places.

So long as he lived, they had never ceased to be lovers—excommunications, slanders, annulments, angry children, and all. But now William the Younger was Duke, and Dangereuse was love's fool, left alone in her tower and surrounded by spies. An old fool, at that, who could hardly walk without her stick.

She raised it again, and the embroidery frame toppled.

The girls, as usual, paid no attention. *"Le Fou d'Or!"* Eleanor cried again, and her small feet in their soft kidskin slippers stamped up and down beneath the trailing skirt of her *bliaut.* Bright crimson, the gown was, with a blue-and-purple embroidered sash worn low about the hips. Dangereuse suppressed a smile. Not what you could really *call* hips, and her breasts still flat as a boy's. But already Eleanor had style and wits and passion, and far more courage than was good for her.

"May I not wear the Fool to dinner tonight, *ma dame?"* the girl coaxed. "Please, on my blue velvet *pellice?* There will be dancing, and Joscelin will be there."

"No," Dangereuse said sharply. "I won't have you preening and prancing for Ventadour's spawn! And if you don't stop bothering me, I shall throw it into the river, and you may go and fish for it!"

Eleanor stamped her foot and her long earrings rattled defiantly. "You wouldn't dare!"

"Hah!" cried Dangereuse. "Jehane! Bring my jewel casket! And open the casement! At once!"

"Pardon, *ma dame,"* Eleanor said, making a deep reverence. "I was too importunate."

Dangereuse merely stared at her. "Beg, then," she demanded. "On your knees and beg. Or out the window it goes!"

The lady Eleanor knelt, her small hands clenched into fists. "I ask your forgiveness," she said coldly.

"Call that begging? You are a mule. Mules need beating."

The girl looked up at her grandmother. "If I beg," she said calmly, "you will despise me. I had rather be beaten. If that is the price of your love."

For a long moment the old woman was silent, her ringed hand gripping her stick. "Very well, Jehane," she told her maid quietly. "Bring my jewels. Let her have her Golden Fool, and much good may it do her."

The servant hesitated. "The bell has already rung for terce, my lady. *Mes demoiselles* will be late for Mass, and—and—"

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"Stop your stammering and go fetch it, blast you."

"Yes, *ma dame,*" Jehane murmured, and disappeared into the countess's bedchamber.

Now that Eleanor had triumphed, she was free to be a child again, leaping around the room, almost tripping over the long pointed sleeves of her gown. "Oh, do hurry, Jehane," she cried. "What's taking you so long?"

"Yes, please hurry," echoed Petronille halfheartedly. She went to the bowl of honeyed almonds at her grandmother's elbow and began stuffing herself as she always did when she was nervous.

The maid, her face as pale as her wimple, returned with the familiar rosewood box set with cabochons of moonstone and amber. "Your hand trembles, woman," said the old countess angrily. "Everything is a matter of will. You must learn to control it."

Jehane merely bent her head in reply. She took her mistress's keys from a chain at her waist—for Dangereuse trusted her in everything—and unlocked the jewel casket. Then she stepped back, silent as always in her grey peasant gown.

Almost before the lid of the box fell open, Eleanor had plunged her small, greedy hands into the tangle of gold chains, pearls, garnet and amber and ivory beads, and jewelled brooches and earrings.

"Well?" said her grandmother. "Don't be all day about it. Pin the thing on, and let me see you."

Eleanor looked puzzled. She took out all the jewels and spread them on the cushions, then peered into the box again. "I—I cannot lay hands on it," she said.

"Nonsense. Look again."

"I have looked again." She turned to the countess, wide-eyed. "It's not here, *ma dame,*" she whispered. "The Golden Fool is gone!"

"Jehane!" cried Dangereuse.

But there was no reply, no sound of soft footfalls in the passage. For the first time in over thirty years, Jehane la Meunière was nowhere to be found.

"You're getting feeble-minded, that's all," growled Duke William. "If you can't find your baubles, don't come bothering me."

Dangereuse stood a few steps above him at the turn of the stair, leaning heavily on her stick. Her thin arms rattled with golden bracelets, and over her hair she wore a rose-colored wimple suitable for a woman half her age.

"I've got a stomachache," whispered Petronille.

"You'll have worse in a minute," Eleanor muttered, "if you don't shut up."

The sisters had hidden themselves behind a tapestry on the landing. They could just see their father's huge bulk through a gap

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in the seam. The duke was tense and angry, as he usually was when forced into a battle of wits with his stepmother.

"Ventadour and his whelps will have a good laugh tonight," she taunted him, "when they learn there's a thief in the house and you can't be bothered to catch him."

William turned on her, furious. "Who told you Ventadour was coming?"

"I have my spies, the same as yourself. But there is something more important. Your eldest daughter begins to be of interest to men. She needs watching. That boy of Ventadour's has his eye on her."

"Will they hang Jehane for stealing the Fool?" Petronille whispered. Eleanor punched her in the stomach.

"The child is a rich prize," Dangereuse told Duke William. "And there are many in Poitou who would not scruple at abduction. She cannot yet conceive, but it will not be long now."

William paced the faded Italian tiles of the stairwell, his boots creaking. "I don't trust you. God knows what plans you have for her. You drove my mother into a nunnery."

"Your mother was a nun from birth."

"You got Father to marry me to your cast-off cow of a daughter. She hated you even more than I do."

"Aenor endured nine years of you and many more years of me, and when she died, she died of endurance. She did not know how to hate. But I do. I have two treasures left in this world, my lord Duke—your eldest daughter and the Golden Fool. I want the jewel back in my keeping. It was my husband's gift and I have paid a high price for it. Make a search. Find it."

"Or else?"

"I shall hand Eleanor to Ventadour's son, that pretty puppy Joscelin. And your precious dukedom will fall, plop, into the lap of your greatest enemy."

"I'll lock you up, you old bawd!"

She smiled. "Go ahead. I have hands and feet in every town from here to Paris."

"Then I'll kill you!"

"You think that will stop me?"

William stood for a moment, shimmering with pure rage, and the girls, still watching from behind the tapestry, thought he would collapse. But without another word to Dangereuse, he turned on his heel and stalked off through the banqueting hall.

"Thierry!" they heard him bellow at his steward. "Call my Guard, Thierry! Find the lady Eleanor and lock her in the keep!"

"Be quiet, Petronille," Eleanor commanded her sister, "and walk tiptoe. If Father locks me away, we shall never find the Golden Fool. Nor Jehane, neither."

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"You don't care about her. You won't get to dance with Joscelin, that's all you're worried about."

"She may know where the jewel is. Besides, she's Grandmother's friend."

"Peasants can't be friends."

Eleanor sniffed. "It depends on the peasant. Besides, she was a gentlewoman till she married the miller. He must've been handsome. I think it's romantic."

The corridors of the old central palace had no windows, and there were so many turnings that you could lose yourself completely. "This is stupid," Petronille whimpered. "We're lost and I'm tired. I've got a pain in my side. I can't go any farther."

"I know where we are. There's a stair down to the stables. If we—"

Suddenly Eleanor pushed her sister flat against the wall. The heavy footsteps of the duke's Guard could be heard coming closer, and in another moment a torch illumined the passageway.

There were two men, both wearing the duke's livery—but unarmed. Eleanor knew at least one of them well. "Baudri," she said, stepping boldly into the light. "So it's you. What are you looking for?"

He smiled. "You're to be locked in the treasure room, my lady gypsy. You're bound to enjoy that."

"Pfu. I hate locks."

He had a nasty cut on his cheek, only barely scabbed-over. Eleanor considered. Guards were always fighting and wenching and gambling, and they always needed money. She looked from one of the men to the other. Then she took off her gold earrings and tossed one of them high in the air. It clattered down onto the stone floor and lay there, glittering in the torchlight.

She laid the other in Baudri's palm. "Let me go now," she said. "Tell my lord father I'm safely locked away, and you may have my rings, too."

"It's worth our hides if we let you go and Ventadour gets his hands on you."

"Blast Ventadour. The Golden Fool is missing, and I mean to find it. And your aunt. She's run away. If you know where she's gone, you must tell me."

His aunt was Jehane, of course. It was she who had gotten him a place in the duke's Guard. Baudri bit his lip and hesitated, staring at the gold earring that still lay in his palm. "Try the cookshop by the south gate of the city," he said at last, his eyes searching the shadows. "Ask for Marie Renart."

In ten minutes more, the girls were on horseback, galloping down the hill to the city gate, under the sweet, white-hot sun of Poitou. Eleanor had learned to ride at three years old and Petronille at

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five, and the sight of them galloping their ponies past vineyards and olive groves and orchards was so familiar that nobody paid much attention.

The convent of Sainte-Croix was just inside the south gate of Poitiers, and beyond it lay a warren of shops—tailors and weavers, and spice merchants and apothecaries, and cookshops like Marie's, where one could buy pasties filled with roast pork and olives, or gingered barley cakes, or cream-and-cinnamon puddings, at any hour of the day or night.

The sisters jumped down from their ponies and began to lead them into the crowded merchant quarter. "Sample my wares, *mes demoiselles?*" said a huckster, approaching them with a tray of tidbits. "Fresh-cooked this morning by Marie Renart herself. Taste before you buy, miss?"

"I shall have a fig tart," said Petronille, selecting two and stuffing them into her mouth.

"What's your name, friend?" said Eleanor.

"Odo, my lady. And that little snot-nose over there is my son, Raoul." He laughed, and motioned to a boy of six or seven playing knucklebones in the dirt. "Marie Renart is my mother. Best cook in Poitiers, she is."

"We must speak to her, Odo. Will you show us the way?"

Odo looked worried, but he did not hesitate. "My mother will be honored," he said. "Raoul! Come and carry this tray while I lead the horses."

It was slow going through the narrow passageways, but at last the little caravan arrived at a red wooden building whose upper story hung out over the lane. A round-faced woman with pink cheeks had been emptying a slop pail out of the upstairs casement, but when she saw the two girls, she quickly pulled the shutters closed and disappeared inside.

"My lad will watch the horses for you," Odo said, and the boy took the reins obediently, holding out his hand in the hope of a coin or two.

"The little rogue wants his palm silvered, *mes demoiselles,*" said a lazy voice from somewhere, and a young man of eighteen or nineteen stepped out from the shadowy doorway of a wineshop nearby.

Joscelin de Ventadour was, as usual, turned out like a peacock—a *chainse* of cream-colored silk beneath his deep-green *cote,* cream silk stockings embroidered with oak leaves, and a short velvet cloak of a rich russet color. He bowed very low, the long curls falling around his handsome, high-boned face.

Before she slept, Eleanor often found herself imagining what it would be like to be bedded by Joscelin. It was supposed to hurt the first time you did it, but she couldn't imagine it hurting with someone so handsome. Besides, at her age, if she were not relieved

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of her maidenhead soon, her wits might turn—all the midwives said so.

"*Alors,* Joscelin," she said, fluttering her long lashes. "At the wine already? At this rate, you won't be able to stand up by this evening, let alone dance with me. Is my lord your father not with you?"

He laughed. "Who knows where he's gone? To some woman or other, I wager. He goes at it like a tomcat."

Joscelin put a coin into young Raoul's palm, and Odo, looking more and more ill-at-ease, hurried into the cookshop. Down the lane, three men stood in a huddle outside the door of a goldsmith. Two were Ventadour's men. The third was Baudri.

"Petronille," Eleanor said. "Go into the cookshop and ask Marie for a fig tart. You haven't had one in ages."

"But I just had—"

"Don't argue, dear. I shall wait for you at the convent. It's almost time for sext. Run along, now."

Eleanor never called her "dear." Besides, Petronille was not Dangereuse's granddaughter for nothing. She saw the three men by the goldsmithy. Two more had appeared now, across the lane near a shoemaker's shop. She took note of them, looked back at Eleanor for a moment, then ran into the cookshop.

Running was out of the question, however, for Eleanor. Her *bliaut* had a train, and she had had no time to belt it up out of the way. If she tripped, they would take her, and mounting her pony unassisted would be impossible.

She had fancied herself in love with Joscelin, but it was most strange, for although she might dream of lovemaking with him, she did not wish to be taken, not by anyone. Besides, there was always a faint smirk on Joscelin's face when he addressed her, as though he found women almost as amusing as dancing bears.

"If you are going to Sainte-Croix for the noontide service, my lady," he said sharply, "you must allow me to escort you."

He gripped her arm with hard, determined fingers. The men down the lane began to close in on them swiftly, and one led Joscelin's horse. Eleanor stopped in her tracks and his fingers pulled her nearer.

He let his free hand travel boldly along her shoulders and down her back to her flat little buttocks, and she shuddered with desire in spite of herself. Suddenly she knew how it was with women like her dutiful mother, how they learned the treachery of their own passions, and grew meek and dull-eyed, and died young.

"Come," he said, "there's no use making trouble. In three hours, you'll be wedded and bedded. It comes to all little girls, you know. You'll endure."

One wrist still held tight in his grip, she rounded on him with her free hand and slapped his face, leaving a bright red mark on

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his cheek. Furious and roused, he twisted both her arms behind her and pulled her against him to make her feel his hardness. It would have had most women—the lucky ones with only loins and no brains—more than willing to ride off with him. But Eleanor was not so lucky.

She kicked and scratched and tried to scream, but one of them shoved a rag in her mouth. Joscelin was about to lift her onto the horse when two nuns, one plump and one very thin, came up behind them on the footpath, bound for the cloister.

Others were beginning to crowd the path, too, on their way to service. Joscelin, cursing under his breath, was obliged to step aside and make way, and thus loosen his hold on his prize. Eleanor shook free of him and spat out the filthy rag.

One of the nuns made the sign of the cross over Joscelin and began mumbling a blessing while the other—it was Jehane—took Eleanor's arm. "My lady," she said, "have you no maids to attend you to service?"

"I came hastily away, *ma soeur,*" said Eleanor. "Perhaps I may walk with you." She turned to Joscelin with a smile a painter might have envied. "My lord de Ventadour will delay me no longer at present, I think."

"He didn't dare to attempt you with so many folk about, my lady," said the plump nun. She plucked off her veil and wimple and sat fanning herself with them. It was Marie Renart, and they sat in her sweltering little parlor above the cookshop. "I'm a bold sinner for pretending to holiness," she said, "but sure as sunrise, it was God put them habits to hand when we needed them. I do a bit of mending for Mother Abbess when the good Sisters are too busy with their nursing. So when Odo come in—"

There was a step upon the narrow wooden stair, and Jehane, transformed to a servant again, came in with a pile of folded garments which she put on the table. "It is a shame for young maids to dress in boys' clothing," she said. "Your grandmother would beat me."

"It's the best way," Eleanor said, as Jehane helped her to unlace her gown. "Whoever invented women's clothes was an idiot. Hurry up, Petronille."

"I won't! *I* don't *want* to wear boys' clothes. It can't be good for you."

"Stay here, then," said Eleanor, "and see how good it is when Father gets his hands on you."

In half an hour, two young Poitevin boys with rough homespun shirts and underdrawers, and strips of homespun wrapped round their legs instead of stockings, stood laughing at one another and eating bread and cheese.

Marie began to gather the scraps into a basket for the poor.

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"Odo's found you a horse to ride home," she said, "so Master Heartbreak won't know you by your ponies."

But Eleanor turned to Jehane. "I saw your nephew in the street just now, with Ventadour's men," she said. "It was Baudri who sent us here to seek for you, and we walked straight into Joscelin's snare. He is in the pay of my father's enemy, that is clear." Her dark eyes narrowed, looking more and more like those of Dangereuse. "This nephew of yours has betrayed us, and perhaps it is he who took the Golden Fool. Do you know what they do to traitors, Jehane? They cut out their tongues, and that is only the beginning. But perhaps you're in league with them too."

Jehane fell on her knees and could not speak. Marie Renart, however, had no such constraints.

"My lady," she said, "Baudri's her own boy, not her nephew. 'Course, he don't know it, for I raised him as my own. Jehane was one of your grandmother's fine ladies when she was your age, but her guardian meant to marry her to a nasty old brute, so she run off. My good brother, he was miller upstream from here at Daunay, and he finds her a-wandering about hungry and he takes her in, and after a bit they was wed. Girart died of the summer fever a year or two after, and she had the boy by that time. So she left him with me and she went to your grandmother and begged to be taken into service."

Eleanor frowned. "Did you not tell her you had borne a child, Jehane?"

"I did not, but there is little one can keep hid from *ma dame.* She knows, I am sure. But she forgets what she chooses. And I could not have kept him with me. Oh, my lady," she said, taking Eleanor's hand, "Baudri is a good man, like his father. And to steal such a jewel as *le Fou d'Or*. . . I do not believe it!"

"Then why did you run away?"

"I stayed as long as I dared. Two days ago, when I went to get *ma dame*'s earrings in the morning, I found the box unlocked. I confess, I have once or twice forgotten to lock it when *ma dame* has chosen what she desires. Sometimes she requires it many times during the day, and sometimes even at night she wakes and wishes to see the Fool, and to hold it. When I found the box unlocked, I looked inside and found *le Fou d'Or* missing. I knew I was sure to be accused, and because Baudri was my—my nephew, I feared he, too, would be suspect. I thought if I hid myself, they would lay the theft at my door only, and seek no further."

"Did you never lose the keys, Jehane, or lend them to Baudri? Can you think of anyone else who might have slipped in when the box was unlocked and taken the Fool?"

Jehane sank down to sit on the floor. "My lady Eleanor, I dare not think at all. I want only a little peace. Your grandmother believes a woman's need to have her own will and decide her own

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destiny never ceases. But I shall go to Sainte-Croix, now, and take the veil, if it can be arranged, and let the world spin its madness without me."

Eleanor, in her strange boys' clothes, paced the little room, back and forth, back and forth. "Go, then. But I must talk to Baudri. Marie Renart, will you tell him I shall be in my father's pear orchard at the fall of dark? Near the herbarium. Say I will not betray him."

"But you will, though," said Petronille, her arms round her sister's waist as Eleanor, in a worn leather jerkin and a close snood cap that hid her long braids, maneuvered Odo's brown gelding toward the homeward road. "You *will* betray Baudri. Won't you?"

"Before he betrays me?" said Eleanor. "If I must, little sister. With a smile."

They had hung lanterns from the boughs of the pear trees, and the candles inside them flickered gently over the misty amethyst shadows of the Clain valley as the distant bells of Sainte-Croix rang compline.

The windows of Duke William's great hall were thrown open to the evening breeze, and laughter drifted out onto the *plaisance,* mixed with the music of tambourines, rebecs, and drums. Red-lipped ladies in gowns of every color trailed their long sleeves seductively to catch the eager eyes of gentlemen who bowed and swirled in the dance, and slipped a fingertip now and then through the lacing of a *bliaut* to trifle with the sweet flesh underneath.

Thanks to the other guard she had bribed, the duke had found his elder daughter safely locked in the treasure room of the tower, where she was meant to be. But once his guests began to arrive, he had thought better of hiding her away from any possible marriage prospects.

Now, dressed in peacock-blue silk and velvet mantle, her crown of dark braids woven with crimson ribbons, Eleanor was indeed the object of many gentlemen's interest. But when they asked her to dance, she pled the headache. She pretended instead to watch a knife-juggler and a couple of tumblers at the edge of the dancing floor. From there, it would be much easier to slip away in the confusion when dinner was served, and find Baudri in the orchard.

"I want to come too," whispered Petronille, appearing at her elbow.

"No. You must stay here." The last thing Eleanor needed was a little sister tripping over tree roots and whining. "Grandmother may need you," she said.

Dangereuse had come down from her tower, of course, dressed to outshine them all, and loaded with face-paint and jewels. But she had growled about her lame foot and had not mounted the dais to

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sit with the other nobles. She perched instead near the open windows, with the duke's two spies, Marielle and Coustance, buzzing around her like flies at a honeypot.

Eleanor's eyes searched among the flushed faces of the dancers. Joscelin was not among them. He might be laying his trap for her even now in the orchard, if Baudri had betrayed her. She drew a deep breath and straightened her shoulders, determined to make a fight of it, if need be.

Suddenly a trumpet blew and a drum began to beat. There was a chorus of shouts, and a shaking of tambourines and wooden rattles, and a troupe of acrobats came prancing in, turning somersaults and juggling torches. Behind them came a company of mummers, and then a puppetmaster, his marionettes as brightly dressed as the great lords and ladies.

At last came the moment Eleanor had chosen to make her escape. The servants, bearing silver basins and fine linen towels and ewers of water with spiced rose petals, began the usual washing of the guests' hands before the meal was laid. Everyone began to drift to the tables, and when Petronille looked around again, her elder sister had gone.

A quarter-hour later, a boy in a long homespun shirt, a snood cap, and a leather jerkin strode through the pear orchard. Beyond the trees, the river could be heard lapping softly against the stone pilings of the landing stair.

"Boy!" said a hoarse voice from the herbarium beyond. "Have you seen Lady Eleanor?"

"Who wants her?"

"Ah, my lady. At last. It is I, Baudri, that unfortunate imbecile."

She moved nearer. "I have no time to palter. Are you Ventadour's man, or mine?"

"Yours, my lady, in my heart. But Joscelin discovered the Golden Fool in my possession, and he says he will see me hanged, and my aunt, too, if I don't help him secure you."

"So you *did* steal the Fool, then."

"No! It was there, in my saddlebag. How it came there, I don't know. Only—I have debts, and it seemed like a gift of God, so—I'm a sinner, but I tried to pawn it. There's a fellow in Masons Lane who does such business, legal or not. Ventadour was there on the same kind of errand. He knew the jewel—who does not? I fought, but his men took it from me."

It explained the cut on his cheek she had noticed that morning.

Baudri breathed heavily for a moment, as though he had been running. "My lady, he's—he's here now. Joscelin. I had to tell him you would meet me tonight. But I sent him to the landing stair by the river. You must go back to your father now, before you're discovered."

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She stood there, thinking hard thoughts. If she were taken tonight, her father would raise an army and attack Ventadour. If Joscelin were killed, it would be the same, except that Ventadour would attack Poitiers. There would be war, and it would go on until the poor were digging roots by the roadsides and living on rancid hazelnuts and dead mice.

But was Petronille perhaps right? If you started considering the lot of the poor, you'd soon be joining them. Look at Jehane. No, it was a treacherous game, when you got as rich as the duke was, and only self-interest served it. Very well, then. Self-interest. If her father should be killed, the new Duchess Eleanor would be married off by a guardian to some witless fool with a crown or a coronet. Or she might, she thought ruefully, run away and marry a miller. No, no. A war must not be allowed.

"What will you do, Baudri," she said, "if I go inside now and hide behind a tapestry?"

"I shall fight Joscelin, my lady, and recover the jewel. It's all I can think of."

Eleanor smiled in the darkness. "Better say a prayer then. For if you fight as feebly as you think, we'll both be in Heaven by midnight."

Dangereuse felt young again, quite a girl. She had thrown her stick away at the edge of the orchard, where the lanterns winked and sparkled in the branches. She had done it as an act of sheer will, but it amazed her to find that she could walk, even in the long grass between the trees, without tripping and without pain.

There was still a clamor in the hall, and Petronille kept on wailing. Excellent, thought the old woman with a soft laugh. The child's only talent was at last proving useful.

It had been an inspired maneuver. As Petronille passed on her way to her father's side, Dangereuse had pushed her stick neatly out in front of the child. Petronille had tripped and fallen—naturally—and half a dozen servants had collided with each other, their silver chargers of roast swan and peppered peacock clattering down. It was just the sort of chaos she had needed to escape the watchful eyes of Lady Coustance and Lady Marielle.

For the countess had, of course, been warned. "Go to the pear orchard," the note had said. "Joscelin will come to the landing stair after compline. He has the Fool." She knew well enough the careful strokes of Jehane's pen, and she still trusted her implicitly, runaway servant or not.

Stopping beneath an unlighted tree, Dangereuse drew from her sleeve a small, finely-wrought dagger, then pulled her veil across her face. She must be very near to the river now. She could hear it, running fast toward the invisible sea.

Then a murmur of voices reached her. "If my bride doesn't come

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soon," she heard Joscelin say, "then a plague on the little bitch. Besides, there's a new whore at Gigot's I've been wanting to sample."

"Pig," growled Eleanor. She and Baudri, flat on their bellies in the long river grass, could hear every word. Baudri, too, had a knife—broad-bladed, thick, strong enough to cut off a man's head.

They began to crawl closer, but suddenly Baudri stopped, as a dark-clad, veiled figure came out of the thinning trees. "Is it your sister?" he whispered. "No, no. See, she limps."

Dangereuse. Eleanor's heart felt as though it would burst. Had the old woman not threatened to hand her to Joscelin? Now here she was, come to strike her witch's bargain.

There was a flare of light from a torch, and four men, one of them Joscelin, came up the stone stair from the riverbank. From where she lay, Eleanor could smell the wine on them, heavy and sour. The old woman stood her ground, her face still veiled.

"Ah, *ma petite!*" sneered Joscelin, catching sight of her. "So you are come. That's it, no use to run. Raymonde, go and make the boat ready. You two, escort my lady Eleanor down to the landing!"

It was exactly as Dangereuse had planned. Taking her for her granddaughter, the men overwhelmed her, but she remained silent and did not resist. At last, with a drunken laugh, one fellow lifted her in his arms, and as he did so, her veil fell away. Instead of the fresh features of a girl of twelve, they saw an old crone, grotesque as a gargoyle on a waterspout—the skin painted whiter than flour, the eyes ringed with black kohl and the lids colored a deep green, the shrivelled cheeks decorated with perfect circles of vermilion.

"Christ save us!" cried the man, and he all but dropped her in his haste to cross himself. "Holy Mother," murmured the second.

"Ah," said Dangereuse in her deep, sensual voice. "They swoon at my beauty. Come, bridegroom. Would you not like a kiss before you bed me?"

Joscelin stared at her, livid. "I'd sooner bed a snake," he said.

"As no doubt you have. I've come for my jewel."

"Burn in hell."

"Give me my jewel and you shall have my granddaughter."

He came a step closer. "Why shouldn't I kill you, take the girl, and keep the jewel, too?"

There was a slight noise upriver, the thud of a boat striking the bank. Some hungry peasant out poaching eels. Dangereuse spat into the darkness. "I begin to believe you've never had the jewel at all. Such a mooncalf as you? Pah!"

Joscelin reached into a leather scrip at his side and in a moment the great golden brooch glowed like a banked coal in the torchlight. "Well, old slut?" he jeered. "Here it is. Now where's the girl?"

"I am here."

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Before Baudri could stop her, Eleanor stood up, a slim, boyish form in the deepening summer dark.

"Take her!" commanded Joscelin, and his two henchmen dived after her. She ran well, but she was not used to the boy's shoes she wore, and they tripped her. She clawed the face of one man, and Baudri slashed at the other with his knife, cutting open the fellow's thigh. They threw Eleanor brutally aside, and her body rolled down and down and down the steep slope, till at last she caught herself on the root of a tree and lay still.

"Idiot! Go after her!" she heard Joscelin shout.

She lay still, hoping not to be seen. But the men did not come. At last, peering round the twisted trunk of the scrubby tree, she caught sight of still another woman, carefully mantled and veiled, just climbing the wet riverbank. She moved steadily, taking no pains to conceal herself. Something about her silence and the calm containment of her body was more than familiar.

Jehane.

The woman and the girl reached the top of the slope almost at the same moment, and found a battleground spread out before them. The man Baudri had wounded now lay dead, the great knife still in his heart. The other, stabbed in the eye with his own dagger, groaned away his last few breaths.

They had dropped the torch onto a pile of grass and dead pear branches, and now a small fire burned there, smoking badly. The jewel lay on the ground beside it, the grinning mouth of the Golden Fool gaping wide with obscene laughter.

On one side of the fire crouched Joscelin de Ventadour, his dagger slashing and plunging, fighting the smoke. On the other, dancing and feinting and coiled like a snake, was Dangereuse.

Joscelin's hands were bleeding. Each time he reached for the jewel, she stabbed at him with her dagger, rarely missing her mark. When the smoke drifted aside for a moment, Eleanor could see that the old woman's face paint had begun to melt in the heat, and black tears ran down her red cheeks.

Baudri, unarmed now, rolled in the grass with the one called Raymonde, the two so tightly entangled they might have been a pair of lovers tumbling there.

Eleanor had brought a dagger of her own, but it was gone now, lost in the grass. She kicked once or twice at Raymonde to distract him, but it was useless.

Then she went to the body of one of the dead men, hoping to get his short sword from the scabbard. But the dead are very heavy and she could not turn him over. Jehane, trembling like an overtightened lute string, came to help her.

In a moment, it would be too late. Baudri was losing his battle.

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He lay spent, as Raymonde, standing over him, raised his own sword to finish it.

In an instant, before Eleanor could pull her back, Jehane darted up. *"Mon fils!"* she cried. My son.

Even if he had wanted to, Raymonde could not have stopped the blade from plunging downward. Jehane threw herself across Baudri's body, and the sword pierced her in a single stroke, pinning her body to that of her son. Blood was everywhere. From the distant hall came the rhythm of the dance drums, the rattle of tambourines through the dark.

Raymonde had had enough. He ran for the boat, and they heard the splash of oars.

Dangereuse stood silent, the paint bleeding from her face, now, in tears so compounded that it was not possible to tell which were real and which were not. Joscelin saw his advantage and reached for the Fool one last time, his dagger raised. *"Grandmère!"* cried Eleanor.

The old countess looked up, dazed and confused. What war was this? Bah! There was only one, and it began at the hour of birth. She felt tired now, and when she stared at her hand, it shook as Jehane's had that morning. A matter of will, she thought vaguely. Everything is a matter of will.

With her free hand, she picked up a burning branch from the fire. "Hah!" she cried, slashing at Joscelin with it. The wide sleeve of his velvet *cote* sparked, smouldered, and began to burn.

"Christ!" he cried. "You're mad!" Then the other sleeve, too, was on fire. He ran for the landing stair, and Eleanor could see that his long curls were in flames.

They heard the splash as he dived into the river to save himself. He might be scarred with burns, but he would live. And there would be no war.

Dangereuse dropped the burning stick and threw her dagger into the darkness. She was limping badly now, as she made her way to Jehane's body. "I shall die soon, *amie,"* she whispered, looking down at her friend.

"Die later," Eleanor said coldly. "Help me now."

Together they pulled the sword from Jehane's thin body. They laid her gently aside and Dangereuse covered her face with her own veil.

Eleanor made a packing of leaves around the wound in Baudri's chest. It was not much. Like Joscelin, he would live. "Would you really have given me to Ventadour?" the girl said as she worked.

Dangereuse laughed softly. "I was bluffing, little duchess. At my age, it's all you have left."

Eleanor picked the brooch up from the ground and polished it on her sleeve. "Here, then," she said. "Take back your treasure. If it's been worth all this, keep it close."

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But the countess looked round instead, startled. *"Hein!* What's that?"

There was a whining sound in the orchard behind them. The voice was unmistakable. "Petronille?" said Eleanor. "Little idiot! Come here at once!"

The younger girl crept slowly out from among the pear trees, wiping her nose with the sleeve of her *bliaut.* "They weren't supposed to be dead," she said, looking down at Jehane and the others. "But they're all peasants, so of course they don't really count." She fingered the jewel Eleanor still held in her hand. "It was easy to take it. Jehane was out of the room for a moment, and nobody ever pays any attention to me. I thought Baudri would find it in his saddlebag and return it, and no one would ever know."

Eleanor stared. "*You* took the Golden Fool? But why?"

Petronille shrugged. "Because I wanted to. Is that not enough?"

That night, as the feasting faded in the great hall, and the dogs gnawed the bones of peppered peacocks, Petronille—with a blackened eye—slept soundly between sheets scented with rosemary.

But two other women, one old and one young, stood side by side at the opened casement of the Maubergeonne Tower. A deep laugh rang out in the darkness as something fell with a splash into the river below. It was gold, and it shone like the memory of old and faded loves.

"Why throw it away now, *Grandmère?"* asked the girl.

The old woman smiled in the moonlight. "Because," she said, "I could." ●

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Art by Mark Evan Walker

PEARLER

by Cheryl Rogers

Vi wanted a pearl.

As Eric gunned the cruiser along the open road north of Carnarvon, she decided that she'd indulge herself when they reached Broome. If the marriage survived that far.

Some keshi earrings, maybe, or a blister pearl ring. A strand was out of the question, of course, but her personal savings might just stretch to one cultured South Sea pearl set on a gold band. After fifteen weeks, six days, and—Vi glanced at her watch—seven hours caravaning with Eric, she deserved a treat.

The lines etched in her weathered face deepened as her husband of thirty-five years slapped the radio console with the calloused flat of his hand. She felt something small and hard, like the seed of a pearl itself, irritate the back of her throat as loud hillbilly music suddenly blared from twin speakers to fill the cab.

"Think I'll buy myself a pearl pendant when we get to Broome," she hollered above the strains of the banjo duel from *Deliverance.* She didn't glance at Eric. Didn't dare take her eyes off the road.

But he heard. Oh, he heard!

"Ya think that's wise?" he shouted back, settling round-shouldered

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over the steering wheel as the cruiser swallowed up the long road ahead of them. "Given the state of your neck?"

It was then that Vi knew.

She'd kill him.

"Left hand down hard. Harder! Now BACK . . ."

Vi, one lean brown arm gesturing wildly, the other hugging a coconut to her chest, was directing Eric's attempt to reverse their "de-luxe" caravan into the bay they'd been allocated at Cable Beach.

He'd already clipped a coconut palm with the roo bar.

She'd known he'd find it hard, given his lack of height and his frozen left shoulder. But then it had been his idea to do *all* the driving.

"Driving's a man's job," he'd said with finality, ignoring her unblemished thirty-eight-year driving record, when she'd offered to take the wheel.

He'd been just as insistent about selling their unit in outer suburban Sydney to finance their back-to-nature, once-in-a-lifetime holiday around Australia.

And about needing a thirty-five-foot caravan (with shower, toilet, and optional extras as standard) to do it in style.

And about buying a top-of-the-range Land Cruiser with power-assist trailer brakes to pull it.

A sigh escaped as the dust-caked vehicle kangaroo-hopped. And stalled.

Then came Eric's frustrated bellow. "Chrissakes, stand where I can see you, woman!"

Vi felt her cheeks flush crimson. And she knew it had nothing to do with the northern sun.

The flush deepened as she became aware of a small crowd gathering under a frangipani tree outside the communal laundry.

"Let's skip the camel ride . . ." she heard one grating wit hoot, ". . . this is more entertaining."

The cruiser roared to life again. Eric ran it forwards, almost nudging the edge of the group of onlookers, then tortured the gears into reverse.

Vi's mouth felt suddenly dry. The hard little lump in her throat was back. It felt like a twenty-millimeter sphere of nacre.

Australian Cheryl Rogers has provided a few notes to accompany her new story. "Broome is a popular holiday destination two and a half hours' flying time north of Perth, on Australia's west coast," she says. "It's where the outback meets the ocean and it has a rich pearling history. Carnarvon is one of the northwest towns one must drive through en route to Broome from the south. A 'roo bar' is a cowcatcher." "Pearler" is Ms. Rogers's second story for us. ¶

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She tried to speak.

"Down HARD on the left, then back . . ."

But no sound came out.

She swallowed, and began again.

"Down HARD on the left . . ."

Too late.

Vi winced as Eric's foot slipped off the brake. Onto the accelerator.

There was a sickening squeal as tires spun on slick, manicured grass. Then bit in. Hard!

The crowd gasped.

A split-second later Vi watched in horror as Eric rammed their executive dream home into the rear of a low-profile pop-top.

"Jeee-sus," she heard someone say in a voice strangely like her own.

Her legs seemed separate from her body as she ran to check that no one was injured.

Eric, struggling his short bulk free of the steering wheel, was gawping like a stranded koi as she shot past with the coconut tucked under one arm.

"You remember to pay that insurance renewal?" His tone was querulous. Like a small, corpulent child, anxious to defer blame.

Vi ignored him.

"Belongs to the Smythe-Fitzwillies." She recognised the grating chirrup of the hoot owl. "Or rather, *did.*" She could have done without that qualification. "They're down the beach. Waiting for sunset."

"Thanks," she managed, digging her nails into her palms.

Then, on impulse, she raised the coconut. And hurled it at Eric.

It was spiralling through the air towards the back of his head when she heard the hoot owl snap at his wife, "I *told* you to bring the video camera!"

Howard and Marcia ("Call me Marce, I *insist.*") Smythe-Fitzwillie were remarkably gracious, under the circumstances.

The circumstances being that the rear third of their tiny pop-top had been destroyed by Vi and Eric's reinforced back end.

"By Jove, you did a jolly good job!" Howard flashed a dazzling white smile and spun on equally dazzling canvas deck shoes to face Eric.

Vi watched as her husband shifted uneasily from one steel-capped boot to the other. His porcine neck appeared to be trying to swallow his head.

"But no harm! No harm! We were planning to rid ourselves of the little devil anyway." Silver-haired Howard was clapping Eric on the back now. He spun to face Marcia and smiled ruefully. "So, what says you, Marce? Fancy a few nights in a *suite?*"

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The word whooshed out of him. At which point Marcia snorted and wriggled on the spot as though trying to shed her clothes then and there. At the same time, her dark-rimmed eyes widened, and her tongue began flicking in and out between her barely parted, pearl-white teeth.

Howard appeared bemused. "Shall I take that as a 'yes'?"

Vi, fortified by a double-strength gin and tonic, watched the couple's performance with detached amazement.

For a start, the Smythe-Fitzwillies' choice of clothing astounded her. Howard's tall, broad-shouldered physique was clothed in a loose-fitting T-shirt and Bermuda shorts. Tall, tanned, fashionably thin Marcia with her frizz of dark hair was suited identically, but in a figure-hugging style. Both in a colour Vi could only describe as *electric* white.

"They're dressed like a pair of *yachties,*" she remarked to Eric over a Cup-a-Soup after the luminous Smythe-Fitzwillies had left them their mobile telephone number and headed into town to find a suite. "How in heaven do they manage to look so *pristine?*" She was still coming to grips with the spectacular red pindan dirt that had given her one decent frock a burnt-sienna tinge.

Eric was barely listening. He was grappling with a dilemma of his own.

"They're obviously *monied.*" He sucked long and noisily on his soup. "What the blazes are they doing in a fourteen-foot pop-top?"

He belched and shoved his dirty mug at Vi.

She grimaced, then found her lips twitching as Eric turned away from her.

A lump the size of a small coconut had risen on the back of his head.

Eric was anxious to visit the new reptile attraction. To see the crocs. It stood to reason, Vi told herself, given his obsession with Steve "The Crocodile Hunter" Irwin. Before that, it'd been Crocodile Dundee. And before him, the Leyland Brothers.

They walked the distance because Eric had insisted on putting the cruiser in for a service, "to check the brakes."

They'd judged their arrival to coincide with feeding time. Eric, resplendent in a khaki jacket, safari vest, and matching trousers, could barely contain his excitement.

"Weather warming up like this, they'll be lively," he grinned as he bounced along the footpath beside her. He threw a few air punches, rubbed his frozen shoulder, and snarled. "Eat ya heart out, Stevie boy."

Vi frowned. She felt the pearl seed form again at the back of her throat, but fought it.

Then she glanced across to a palm-sheltered grove on the oppo-

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site side of the street. What she saw made her irritation evaporate.

Pearl Emporium, the sign read. It stood above a glass-fronted showroom surrounded by golden hibiscus and frangipani.

"Look, Eric." She indicated across the street. Her hushed tone was reverent. "Pearl showroom. There."

But shadowboxing Eric barely heard. He was still wrestling the imaginary crocs swimming in his head.

"Wassat?" he eventually acknowledged.

"Nothing," Vi replied, lengthening her stride to increase the distance between them.

The guide at the reptile park had a dead chicken on the end of a rope. The big crowd jostled for position outside the enclosure around the still, green water as he stood on an elevated platform and swung the carcass out.

"Ooo-aaagh," the cry went up from the crowd as a thirty-foot male croc appeared from nowhere and launched itself out of the mire. Its big jaws snapped shut on the dead bird and yanked it back into the water.

"How'd he do that?" an American tourist demanded.

"It's all in the timing," the guide replied. "Timing is everything."

Eric turned to Vi. His beady eyes were glittering yellow with delight. "Grab a picture next time he comes up."

Vi fidgeted in her holdall, eventually extracting an aged SLR camera.

"Move to the left, Eric, now back, back . . ."

Eric, for once willing to oblige, had his back hard-pressed against the mesh enclosure.

"Oi!" It was the guide. His tanned face creased in a good-natured but warning smile. "Would you move back from the fence there, please?" He was gesturing at Eric, waving him away. "These boys can get mighty stroppy if you get too near their territory."

"Thanks," Vi mouthed at the guide. She flashed him a smile that didn't reach her eyes.

Then, as nonchalantly as she could muster, "Many crocs still in the wild hereabouts?"

"Shot a six-metre male up the beach just a few months back," the guide supplied. "It's the mangrove swamps further north you've gotta watch. Used to be full of crocs, even around here, until they were hunted out. But now they're protected they're moving back, reclaiming their territory."

Vi managed to bite back the suggestion that she and Eric head north as soon as the cruiser was back in action.

She knew she mustn't rush.

Mustn't panic.

Like the good-looking young man said, *timing is everything.*

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Any further thoughts were interrupted by a throaty greeting across the convalescent crocodile pens.

"Well, hello-o!"

Eric was first to spot the Smythe-Fitzwillies.

"It's Marce. And Howard. Cooooo-eeee!" he shouted in reply.

Marce wriggled her way through the crowd towards them. She was wearing a tight-fitting white strapless dress with a shirred bodice and looked, to Vi, like a brown snake struggling to shed its skin.

"What *utter luck!*" Marce enthused. She air-kissed Vi, then stooped to peck a beaming Eric on his bald pate.

But then Howard was gripping Vi's hands tight in his big, warm, brown clamps.

"We were only talking about you this morning." His treacle-brown eyes flitted from Vi to Eric. "We're joining a fishing charter up Dampier Creek day after tomorrow. There're some seats spare, if you two'd like to join us."

Vi giggled. "This old bird's strictly terrestrial," she lied. She'd been a keen sailor before her marriage. A day on the water held a lot of appeal.

But an Eric-free day held more. "Eric would *adore* to go, wouldn't you, pet?

Eric needed no second bidding. His eyes were already trawling Marcia's cleavage.

"Super! Utterly super!" Marcia clapped her hands together and flashed a dazzling smile.

It was then that Vi noticed.

Her pearl-white teeth were false.

Eric was hell-bent on visiting the bird observatory. At dawn.

Vi sat resignedly in the passenger seat, clutching the thermos, as they sped out along the bitumen road through the hobby-farm belt on the outskirts of town.

"Siberian waders should be in if we're lucky." Eric had his best binoculars around his neck and *Gould's Pocket Guide to Passerines and Non-Passerines* swelling his pocket. "We should see stilts, cormorants, pelicans, maybe a sea eagle . . ."

Vi found herself tuning out.

"You've missed the bloody turnoff, woman!" Eric turned to face her as he slung the cruiser into the gravel and did a swift U-turn. His eyes glittered in the half-light, his face twisted in sarcasm. "Keep your mind on the road, can't you; you're supposed to be navigating!"

They carried on in chilly silence, eventually finding the turnoff and heading out along red dirt towards the observatory.

Vi felt her buttocks contract as they hit the corrugations.

And Eric's dentures began to rattle.

In time with her own.

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Vi woke with an unfamiliar sense of calm the day of the fishing charter. Eric—and his extensive collection of tackle—had been gone since daylight. One whole day of freedom stretched ahead of her.

She was at the Pearl Emporium as it opened. But she paused to savor the creamy sweet scent of frangipani before pushing open the door.

Row upon row of glass cabinets stretched before her, each bearing artfully displayed examples of lustrous pearls.

Their brilliance made Vi catch her breath. She turned, uncertain where to start.

"Like some help?" A young female assistant looked up from a tray of earrings at the business end of the showroom.

"I'm fine, for now. Thanks." Vi smiled. The girl had a halo of soft, golden curls, like a Botticelli angel.

"If you *do* need any help, just ask." The girl returned the smile and bent her head again to her tray.

Vi spent a blissful hour admiring the displays. There were white and silver South Sea pearls along with rare and exotic colours such as champagne, rose, cognac, and peach.

It was on her third lap that she paused in front of a piece of jewellery that stood out from the rest. She beckoned to the assistant. "Perhaps you can tell me a little more about this. . . ."

For all her youth, the girl proved a knowledgeable guide.

"It's the luster that's important," she told Vi, bringing out the champagne-coloured teardrop set on a shining gold band. "If a pearl has good luster, any number of tiny flaws and marks will go unnoticed."

"A bit like people, I expect," Vi laughed, fingering the exquisite gem. "Or a marriage," she added, somewhat ruefully.

The girl summoned a sympathetic smile, then continued.

"See." She turned the tear-shaped gem in her hand and held it to the light.

Vi had to put on her reading glasses to see the tiny flaw the girl indicated. It seemed insignificant weighed against the pale gold beauty of the pearl.

The Botticelli angel smiled knowingly as she held out the piece of jewellery. "Perhaps you'd like to try it on?"

Vi had to undo the top three buttons of her sensible shirt with its high collar to try on the pendant. It sat against the creped folds of her neck, glowing as though it possessed a secret inner life.

She reached one hand up and fingered the cool, smooth surface. The jewel seemed to pulse and glow, like a living thing, potent and beautiful.

Vi caught her reflection in the mirror and suddenly coloured.

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"You must think me ridiculous." She fumbled with the pendant. "A silly old woman my age." The catch refused to budge.

"Not at all," the girl wisely replied. "You obviously have a keen eye for beauty. And as I said, if a pearl's luster is good . . ."

"How much?" Vi countered.

The girl told her.

It was five hundred dollars more than she'd budgeted.

On a piece of jewellery, when it came down to it.

A frippery.

A silly indulgence.

What on earth would Eric say?

An image of Eric on his four-hundred-dollar fishing charter with his expensive collection of hooks, lines, and sinkers suddenly flashed before her.

"My husband will kill me. But I'll take it," she said, whipping her Visa card from her holdall and slapping it on the counter in front of the startled assistant. "I'll take it. And I'll *wear* it!"

The girl smiled as she completed the transaction.

"You've made an excellent choice," she said sagely, then added a little more wistfully, "I've had my eye on that one myself."

The pearl, safely hidden beneath the sensible high collar that was the trademark of all Vi's equally sensible shirts, pulsed against the folds of her throat as she left the showroom.

She felt liberated. Wild! It was the first impulsive thing she'd done in months. No, years!

Hell, she admitted to herself—decades.

She walked along the footpath, some distance behind a string of camels padding home from their morning session along the beach. Behind the string ran an attendant with a dustpan and brush, conscientiously stooping to clean up camel dung from the walkway.

Vi smiled and felt her pearl resting under her cotton shirt as she watched him. She felt like a million dollars!

She glanced at her watch. Five hours of freedom left.

Vi caught the bus to Chinatown and wandered through shanty alleys where corrugated white buildings housed pearls and antiques—side by side with tie-dyed surf gear.

She found her way down to Streeters Jetty and walked tall out over the mud flats as mist rolled across the mangroves. She imagined sail-driven luggers riding the tide in to ply their trade.

At Town Beach she spent twenty minutes watching tiny hermit crabs slowly eat their way through a beached fish. The quick movers in the colony scuttled for safety as she scooped a handful to study their myriad colours in a dozen different types of shell.

She felt the pulse at her throat quicken as she read a sign

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erected on the foreshore. WARNING! it read. A CROCODILE HAS BEEN SIGHTED IN THIS AREA. PLEASE TAKE CARE.

At the shell museum she studied beautiful but deadly cone shells in glass cabinets.

"How do these things work?" she inquired of an English tourist engrossed in a thick copy of *Australia's Fatal Fauna.*

"They shoot out a spear, lovey." The woman was only too happy to supply every detail. "And inject their prey with a neurotoxin. Lethal, they are." Her eyes grew wide. "And there's no antivenin."

"Deadly." Vi smiled.

"But what *isn't* deadly in your country, lovey, that's what I want to know." The woman was obviously an expert. "You've got your sharks, and your crocodiles, your sea snakes and your stingers, your blue-ringed octopus, your box jellyfish . . ." She appeared to be enjoying her appreciative audience. "Not to mention your tides! 'Specially round here."

Vi maintained her composure while the woman drew breath.

"Tell me more about the tides," she prompted.

"Well, just north of here the tide comes in faster than a man can *run.* Be nasty to be caught in that, lovey, wouldn't it?" The woman laughed. "At *our* age."

A mental picture of Eric jogging in steel-capped slow motion flashed before Vi's eyes.

The woman was still laughing. A laugh sharp as broken glass.

Vi caught the bus to a hotel overlooking Roebuck Bay and sipped a cool white wine with a lunch of chili mussels and pasta. It was a rare treat. Eric couldn't eat chili, so she didn't. It burnt his lips.

Turning to take a quick glance at her fellow patrons, she thought she saw a familiar figure.

But it couldn't be.

She craned her neck, and squinted. "That you, Howard?"

Howard Smythe-Fitzwillie blanched under his tan. But he recovered quickly, winked, and raised one finger to his lips.

"Mum's the word," he implored, slipping into the seat beside Vi.

The move made her sit bolt upright.

"Explain?"

Howard forced a guilty grin. "Truth is, I hate all the blood and gore that goes with fishing. So I pleaded a migraine." He leaned closer, and lowered his voice. "Besides, it's nice to have some space sometimes. Travelling with Marce can get a little *intense.*"

After a long, late, lazy lunch, Vi made her way to the Hovercraft terminal and got the last window seat on a sunset champagne flight across the bay. She settled back as the craft slowed for a pod of leaping dolphins, then screamed with excitement as it accelerated and spun out across the flats.

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"You're late!"

Eric had neglected to take his key. He'd been back since midafternoon. He was perched forlornly on the step of the caravan, his empty fishing bucket beside him.

"Fish for dinner?" Vi looked pointedly at the empty bucket.

"Only if you're buying." Eric looked more downcast than ever. "Had a threadfin salmon. Hooked him!" He stretched his arms wide, then slumped and shook his head. "Line snapped just as I was about to reel the bastard in."

Eric's paunchy face sagged like a pricked balloon.

"And I had to fork out for Marce's share of the trip." He smiled ruefully. "Forgot her checkbook."

"What about Howard?" Vi was pleased how normal her question seemed.

"Had a migraine, poor bugger." Eric stood up and followed her inside. "Do you know that bloke's a woman specialist?"

Vi paused. "Explain?"

Eric was packing away his knives. "He's a period doctor."

Vi thought for a moment. "Do you mean a periodontist?"

"Yeah." He cursed as he nicked his thumb and sucked on it. "Something to do with oral bejesus or some such."

Vi smiled. So Howard was a periodontist. That at least explained the unnaturally white condition of the Smythe-Fitzwillies' teeth.

They ordered fish and chips at a little outdoor cafe on the wharf. Eric sucked noisily on the neck of a cold stubbie while the meal was prepared. Vi sipped chilled white wine.

She'd changed into her one good frock—again with a sensible high collar, against the heat. And how glad she was of the choice now.

She played one hand across her throat and secretly fingered her pearl as Eric, ignoring her, trailed his eyes around the couples seated at the tables around them.

He grimaced as one couple, with a brace of noisy youngsters, battled to distribute garlic bread with any sort of order.

But then Eric had never had much patience with children.

"What do you want with a pack of brats, woman?" That was how he'd announced to her that *he'd* decided *they* didn't want children. Vi remembered the moment well. It was the first time she'd felt the tight swelling in her throat, the gnawing pain that buying today's pearl seemed to have assuaged.

Then, as it happened, he'd been unable to father a child anyway.

His long-standing run of casual affairs was proof enough of that.

Eric loved getting back to nature. Bird-watching was his passion! And not just the feathered kind.

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Vi's irritation with Eric had grown over the years. Layer upon layer.

Like nacre slowly swelling into a cool, hard core.

Like pearl.

Except this creation wasn't beautiful.

It was ugly.

Vi winced as Eric belched.

Damned ugly!

She took another sip of wine, and began to plot. *Stonefish. Cone shells. Crocs. Tides. Sharks. Snakes. Stingers.*

She took a bigger sip. Then a gulp. The list was *endless.* She'd send Eric back to nature, all right.

But timing was everything.

She'd have to be careful.

And then, as it happened, the matter was taken entirely out of her hands.

"Oh jolly Jove! Not *again!*" It was Howard, wending his way through the tables, with Marce shuffling her high heels behind him. "We were just getting a takeaway, and spotted you."

He stooped to kiss Vi, and pumped the hand Eric offered.

"Got your head back on?" Eric didn't stand up.

"My . . . ? Oh!" Howard tapped his temple. "Yes, thanks to a Panadeine Forte and a good lie-down."

Vi watched Howard's face. No trace of guilt.

She turned her attention to Marcia, who was unusually quiet.

Like a time bomb.

"So, the fish were too slick," she said, by way of conversation.

"Yes." Marcia fluttered her eyelash extensions. "But at least I got back in time to do a little *serious* shopping."

She raised her glittering, ring-encrusted hand and dragged it across the vast expanse of tanned bare skin revealed by her strapless dress.

Vi's gaze distractedly followed the hand.

Then she let out an involuntary cry.

Against Marcia's bronzed throat glowed a luminous white oval.

"You bought yourself a pearl!" Vi gasped.

She drained the last of her wine, dragged out her reading glasses, and made a pretence of admiring the gem.

The pendant was uncannily similar to her own.

Except that Marcia's pearl was white.

It was flawless.

And it was bigger.

Much bigger.

Walkers found the remains of a woman's body tied to a pylon under a disused jetty.

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Hermit crabs had rendered the corpse unrecognisable. But the coroner estimated she'd been there at least three days.

The body was naked.

Except for a champagne pearl pendant on a gold band.

Tight around the neck.

Which was just as well, because it proved impossible to identify the corpse from dental records.

The skull was missing its upper and lower dentures.

The police picked up Eric at a roadblock not far from Tunnel Creek.

"We're concerned about the whereabouts of your wife, Mr. Geeson," the burly sergeant said.

"What's there to be concerned about?!" Eric snapped. "The cow left me in Broome."

"I think you'd better come with us." Two constables had already extracted Eric from the cruiser and were frogmarching him towards a paddy wagon. "A body's been found."

The sergeant paused.

"I regret to have to inform you that the tentative identification puts it as being your good wife."

He cleared his throat before continuing.

"Eric Winston Geeson, I am arresting you for the murder of Virginia Jean Geeson. You have the right to remain silent . . ."

Jessamine Harcourt, chief assistant at the Pearl Emporium, was a pivotal witness at Eric's trial.

"Yes, I distinctly remember that pearl." Her serious eyes grew round as she accepted a forensic bag containing the pearl she'd sold Vi. "I remember it particularly, because I'd been saving to buy it myself."

She peered more closely. "Yes. It had an almost imperceptible flaw across the lower left back."

A member of the prosecuting team rushed forward and handed the judge and jurors copies of a blown-up photograph. The tiny imperfection was clearly visible.

"I pointed it out to the customer, and I told her if a pearl has good luster then small flaws like this go unnoticed," Miss Harcourt went on. "She made some remark about it being a bit like people. Or marriage."

The prosecuting lawyer let the observation settle on the jury before prompting, "Is there anything else about the buyer that you particularly remember?"

"Well, there was one r-remark . . ." Jessamine Harcourt stammered. "But I don't know if . . ."

"Go on."

"Well, like I said, I'd almost saved enough to buy this pearl, see,

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when the lady came in." The girl dabbed at her eyes with a pink tissue and took a long, sobbing breath. "Lovely she was, sort of unaffected. I was tempted to try to persuade her to buy something else, but she seemed so *set.*"

There was a short silence while the girl regained her composure. She blew her nose, then turned to face the judge.

"I shall never, *never* forget what she said when she decided to buy. 'My husband will kill me,' she said." The principal witness tilted her chin at the jury, and repeated, clearly and slowly, "'My *husband* will *kill* me.'"

"Hrrmmph, er, Miss, er . . ." The judge scrabbled for a piece of paper. "Miss Harcourt. Thank you. Your evidence has been most . . . er . . . enlightening."

But Jess Harcourt hadn't finished. Not quite.

"I was just wondering, Your Honor, after the trial, does evidence like this go into the police auction?"

Howard and Vi, who by then had assumed the identities Charles and Ginny Chadwick, were sailing off Lombok when they heard about Eric's arrest.

The move north had seemed sensible, as had the name changes, given the string of fraud convictions that had been about to catch up with Howard Smythe-Fitzwillie, not his real name.

And Vi had always fancied doing something a little more adventurous than her mother had managed with the perilous *Virginia.*

She sipped on a lime juice and watched Charles capably scale the mast. He moved with the fluid grace of a natural sailor, a grace she'd identified at their first meeting.

The offer to crew this clipper into international waters had come just at the right time.

But then Vi always knew that timing was everything.

And Howard—or Charles—was one clever cookie. Even if the nearest he'd ever come to being a periodontist was a short stint as a technician in a denture clinic.

After all, it had been his idea to remove Marcia's dentures after tying her to that pylon. On a rapidly rising spring tide.

And Vi's to swap pearls.

They'd both agreed that there was absolutely nothing to be gained by leaving one shred of traceable evidence at the scene.

Nor in wasting the spoils.

"Ahoy, there! Fancy helping trim the mainsail?"

Vi tilted her gaze skywards as Howard called down to her.

"Coming." She squinted into the eye of the sun.

She began climbing the mast towards him.

He watched her face split in a familiar reptilian grin that matched the dazzling—if ostentatious—white pearl throbbing against the rapidly rising pulse in her sun-bronzed throat. ●

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PASSPORT TO CRIME

DISGUISED AS A NORMAL PERSON

by Ricardo Adolfo

Translated from the Portuguese by Cara Goodman.

Portuguese writer Ricardo Adolfo has called many places home: Born in Luanda, he was raised on the outskirts of Lisbon, Portugal, and at present lives and works in Amsterdam. In 2003, Publicações D. Quixote brought out his first collection of short stories, "Os chouriços são todos para assar" *(All Chorizos Are To Be Roasted)*. His first novel, *Mizé*, was published in 2006.

Costa had worked as a security guard in the Reboleira supermarket for over two years. The job was everything he had ever wanted: He was making a good living at something that offered adventure, excitement, and the opportunity to develop his detective skills. Costa had always believed he had a sixth sense for detecting things. When he went out with his friends, it was almost always he who found the way back home. On three such occasions, he'd correctly guessed the names of girls they met in bars. And if there was one thing he could do, it was register details: There was never a brawl that Costa didn't first spot from a distance. By the time chairs and glasses started flying, he was already outside the bar with his beer still intact, reminding his friends that he had told them so. Being a detective was an old dream of his, one that he still fed with movies. If he had been born in America, who knows if he might not have turned out to be a real detective, but in Reboleira the closest thing was being a security guard at the supermarket.

The job was divided into shifts. For ten days at a time he would work as a uniformed guard and all he had to do was check and

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seal the bags customers brought with them into the store. Other days, he would work disguised as a normal person in order to catch those customers who didn't want to pay, or who deliberately stole. This week was disguise week, and Costa was walking though the meat section when he sensed something odd about a certain yellow-haired woman. To an amateur, the woman might go completely unnoticed, but Costa had seen plenty of movies and knew when someone was getting ready to do something bad. Costa believed that there were two kinds of people in the world: the good and the bad. And the bad ones, well, you could tell by their faces that they were bad. It was difficult to explain, but it was something in the way they walked, the look in their eyes . . . Yes, the look in their eyes was very important. And that yellow-haired woman had a strange look in her eyes.

As soon as he noticed a possible robbery, Costa would stay right where he was. If necessary, he would endure hours of the chase until the customer got up to the registers. Even once the customer got to the registers, there were ways to tell if he or she was paying for everything or not. Making a mental list of everything the person was buying was one of the first things Costa would do. Then, it was simply a matter of remembering the list once the customer was up at the register and checking to see if everything was there.

The yellow-haired woman was still wandering around the meat section, quite indecisive and oblivious to Costa's scrutiny. First she looked at the pork chops, then it seemed like she was going to get drumsticks, but didn't. Costa could just about guess by now. She was going to get herself some veal. Premium grade, as they say. In her cart, the woman already had a box of detergent—the most expensive kind—a variety pack of juices, rye bread, and some packages of personal hygiene items. The woman was dressed as though she didn't need to steal, but Costa knew that those were the worst sort. The ones who didn't look like they needed to steal, and then because no one suspected them . . . well, there you have it. Her loose clothes were also a bit strange. The woman, though in her forties, seemed elegant, or at least she didn't seem *in*elegant—and such women rarely walked around in baggy clothing. Obviously, something strange was going on there. The most likely explanation was that the loose clothes were for hiding various products. From what he could tell, there was plenty of room underneath her shirt to hide a couple of steaks, one or two chocolate bars, and, if the woman was even thinner than she looked, perhaps a bottle of good perfume.

"Security Guard Costa to the main register, Security Guard Costa to the main register." The announcement over the loudspeaker shot through the supermarket like a gigantic arm and squeezed Costa's heart until his breath stopped. He'd been discovered. Panic. Now what? If the yellow-haired woman realized what was going on, she would no longer try to steal. Even though no one

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was watching him, Costa somehow believed that everyone had figured him out. The disguise that he had spent so long on, that he had created with every last detail in mind, ruined thanks to one announcement over the loudspeaker. It was prohibited to do that to an undercover security guard. Didn't anyone know how to do their job anymore? He was about to crack a case.

He couldn't stay there any longer, but he also couldn't go up to the main register since that would be the proof all the customers had been waiting for. The customers' stares weren't obvious, but he could still feel them. Yes, that loudspeaker announcement had been like a giant arrow pointing right at his head. Like a neon sign at one of those restaurants. Without knowing just how to slip away, he ran behind a stack of sale cookies. Buy One, Get One and a Half read the lettering on the sign.

Any hope for a promotion to section manager had just been killed. A section manager had to be completely unrecognizable. Maybe someone was plotting against him, trying to bring him down. There was a lot of competition in the supermarket world, and jealousy, too. It was all about sticking it to the other guy. There was no camaraderie or cooperation, just trying to trash the next guy so you could be promoted. And Costa knew that the other security guards had already noticed that he had a sixth sense and that one of these days he was going to be promoted to section manager. Right after that would come division chief. One of the most desirable positions in the supermarket world. Now it all made sense. Carla, one of the register girls that he sometimes met out back at the end of his shift for a few kisses, had even told him that she had heard some of the other security guards talking about bringing him down. Why? Jealousy. Pure jealousy. Just because he could see things in a way others couldn't. It wasn't his fault.

"Security Guard Costa to the main register, Security Guard Costa to the main register," the loudspeaker announcement rang again from the paneled ceiling. Furious, Costa ran for the front. He cruised past Home Improvement, rounded the bakery corner, darted down the cleaning-products aisle, and jumped out at Register 34. He landed with his feet together and just one hand out to steady himself and then sprinted for the main register. "You're not going to get me! You're not going to get me!" yelled Costa as he arrived at the main register. "It's not allowed! A security guard who's undercover can't be paged by the loudspeaker," he yelled even louder. "It's against the rules."

Maybe it was despair, the death of his dream, or perhaps it was watching the yellow-haired woman passing by the registers towards the exit without it even looking like she was carrying a package of steaks in her grocery bag. Right then, Costa swore revenge. They were going to pay for this. And before anyone could say anything, Costa yanked out his Reboleira supermarket secu-

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rity badge and threw it to the floor with all the strength a relatively weak man could possibly muster.

"If that's how you want it, that's how you're gonna get it!" he shouted as he stormed out. He finally understood. If they wouldn't let him be a detective, he was going to be a thief. He could even put that strange look in his eyes, just like the bad people. ●

Too High on the Hog

by Harry Hopkinson

My artery's blocked
And my breathin's inhibited,
My heart has been clocked
And my insides exhibited.
My waistline is double
And I'm in big trouble
From eatin' too high on the hog.

The IRS got
Both the Jag and the limousine,
The ranch and the yacht
And the house with the mezzanine.
Now, my woman's gone south
And I'm down at the mouth
From eatin' too high on the hog.

High livin' was takin'
More than I was makin'.
I won't go Jamaican again.
I'm now on the Big Rock,
In number-nine cell block,
Which they say they will unlock,
But when?

Put a bundle in stocks
With some funds I solicited.
When they went on the rocks,
Then the FBI visited.
Should have taken it slow
With the other guy's dough,
But I wanted to put on the dog.
I was eatin' too high on the hog.

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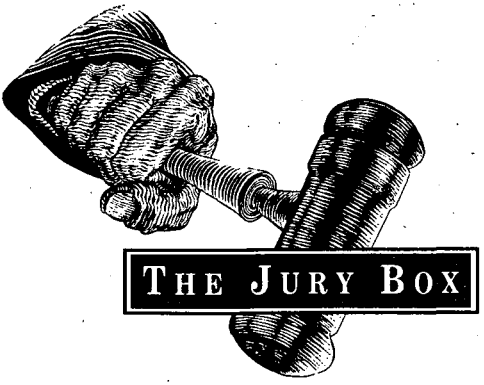

by Jon L. Breen

Involving sleuths of different times in the same case is a difficult and rarely attempted feat. In December 1996, reviewing Ed Gorman's *Hawk Moon,* which teamed present-day FBI profiler Robert Payne with early-twentieth-century policewoman Anna Tolan, the only earlier novel-length example I could think of was *Beyond the Grave* (1986), featuring Marcia Muller's contemporary museum curator Elena Oliverez and Bill Pronzini's 1880s Wild-West sleuth Quincannon. But I overlooked Ellery Queen's 1966 movie novelization *A Study in Terror,* in which Ellery draws his own conclusions from Dr. Watson's account of the 1880s duel of Sherlock Holmes and Jack the Ripper. Now another writer has combined the Baker Street giant with her own contemporary series sleuth.

*** Laurie R. King: *The Art of Detection,* Bantam, $24. Found among the papers of a murdered Sherlockian is a typewritten manuscript apparently by Holmes himself, who encounters the gay subculture of 1920s San Francisco and solves a murder similar to one facing police detective Kate Martinelli. Early chapters bog down in excessive detail, and even the 90-plus-page Holmes "short story" has a laggardly pace, but the plot is cleverly worked out. (Would Holmes be so politically correct by current standards as to use the courtesy pronoun "she" when referring to a male transvestite?)

*** Stephen Seitz: *Sherlock Holmes and the Plague of Dracula,* Mountainside, $16.95. Others, notably Loren D. Estleman and Fred Saberhagen, have combined these two Victorian icons, but Seitz offers a fresh variation, told mostly by Watson through letters and diary entries. Style and use of the characters put this in the upper echelon of pastiches, though the combination of Holmes and the supernatural is an uneasy one.

*** Alex Simmons and Bill McCay: *The Raven League,* Sleuth/Razorbill, $10.99. In one

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of two recent pre-teen juveniles focused on Holmes's younger assistants, Archie Wiggins leaves the Irregulars in apparent disgrace and forms a new group to rescue the kidnapped Holmes and help foil a plot in the run-up to Queen Victoria's Golden Jubilee. With well-drawn characters and fast-paced action, this is slightly the better of the two, though it makes at least one canonical error: Holmes never wore his deerstalker in London!

*** Tracy Mack and Michael Citrin: *Sherlock Holmes and the Baker Street Irregulars: The Fall of the Amazing Zalindas,* Orchard/Scholastic, $16.99. The investigation of the fatal fall of three circus aerialists has more Holmes and captures him well, but some will resent the implication that Watson downplayed the role of the Irregulars out of jealousy. Special features include vivid illustrations by Greg Ruth and notes on Cockney rhyming slang.

** Dave Keane: *The Haunted Toolshed* and *The Neighborhood Stink,* HarperCollins, each $3.99 paperback, $14.99 hardcover. The first two books about Joe Sherlock, Kid Detective, directed at slightly younger children, are played strictly for laughs. While I can't deny the text and illustrations are funny enough to appeal to adolescent males of all ages, I wonder if it's beneficial to give literary respectability to kids' love of gross-out humor based on bodily functions.

**** Margaret Maron: *Winter's Child,* Mysterious, $24.95. In the latest of a distinguished series, Judge Deborah Knott, of North Carolina's Colleton County, confronts two mysteries: the shooting of a local ne'er-do-well while driving his pickup truck and the disappearance of new husband Dwight Bryant's ex-wife and eight-year-old son. Maron's expertly plotted and written books are less often sidetracked from the main narrative than some series with large continuing casts. Unusual weather-related chapter epigraphs are a plus.

**** Nancy Pickard: *The Virgin of Small Plains,* Ballantine, $23.95. In 1987, the body of an unidentified young woman is found in a snowdrift, bringing consequences for three families in a small Kansas town. By the time the truth comes to light in 2004, local legend has brought people seeking healing to the dead woman's grave. The deceptive but logical plot, supernatural overtones, well-realized plains background (including a twister), and familiar romantic-suspense elements will satisfy a wide range of readers.

**** Howard Engel: *Memory Book,* with an afterword by Oliver Sacks, M.D., Carroll & Graf, $24 hardcover; $13.95 trade paper. Private eye Benny Cooperman wakes up in a Toronto hospital, victim of a brain injury that has robbed him of the ability to read, though not to write. Author Engel, whose stroke in 2000 produced the same rare condition, gives a good-humored and intensely in-

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volving insider's account of his affliction, while producing one of the most abundantly clued puzzle plots in recent memory, solved by a detective who has trouble remembering the names of the suspects.

*** Marcia Muller: *Vanishing Point,* Mysterious, $24.99. Family is important to San Francisco P.I. Sharon McCone —consider how many continuing characters in her immediate, extended, and professional families appear in every book. Here she takes on the case of Laurel Greenwood, who disappeared twenty-two years ago, leaving a husband and two young daughters, one of whom wants to find the truth. An unusual whydunit in the rare literal use of the term, this novel takes an unsentimental and ultimately unsettling look at family dynamics.

*** Claudia Bishop: *The Case of the Roasted Onion,* Berkley, $6.99. In his first book-length case, Dr. Austin McKenzie seeks a sniper who is killing his fellow upstate New York vets. The characters, from juvenile leads to villains, are broadly but entertainingly drawn; the first-person narration (most by the doctor, some by his wife) has humorous charm; details of veterinary practice and the equestrian world are convincingly conveyed; and the cleverly devised plot includes fair-play clues. The McKenzies also appear to advantage in the short story "The Melancholy Danish" in the music-themed and CD-accompanied anthology *A Merry Band of Murderers* (Poisoned Pen), edited by Bishop and Don Bruns.

** John Mortimer: *Rumpole and the Reign of Terror,* Viking, $24.95. The third novel about Rumpole, who invariably fares better at short-story length, finds the Old Bailey stalwart defending a Pakistani doctor accused of terrorist activities. The series shows its TV-sitcom roots when regulars act out of character for plot purposes, e.g. Hilda Rumpole's unbelievable relationship with the dreaded Judge Bullingham.

Margaret Millar was one of the greatest American writers of mystery fiction, but her novels have been out of print for years. The double volume combining *An Air That Kills* (1957) and *Do Evil in Return* (1950) (Stark House, $19.95) includes a fine introduction, "The 'Post-Freudian Mysteries' of Margaret Millar," by Tom Nolan, biographer of Millar's husband Ross Macdonald.

Another notable reprint is William Hjortsberg's striking 1978 private eye/dark fantasy hybrid *Falling Angel* (Millipede, $14 trade paper, $65 limited hardcover), set in a vividly realized 1959 Manhattan. James Crumley provides an introduction, the author an afterword, Ridley Scott and Stephen King briefer encomia.

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Where There's a Will...

by Amy Myers

I'm a wicked old man, so all my dearly beloved relations fondly tell me. They don't know the half of it. They've got a shock coming their way when I'm finally hauled kicking and screaming into the afterworld. Not yet awhile. I'm a hundred years old today, and in full possession of all my faculties. Silas Carter at your service. Just like that creepy old bore Humphrey Bone claims he's at mine. Who needs lawyers? Death and divorce is all they're good at. Just as well—he's got a shock heading his way, too.

Look at that marquee out there. No need for it at all. A little bit of rain never hurt anyone. Anyway, it's always sunny on my birthday; that's what darling niece Mary coos at me, bending over me with all her cleavage showing—as though there were anything to look at. Thank the Lord I never had kids of my own. I'm at liberty to see my relations as clear as God made them, and an ugly sight they make. She with her holier-than-thou simper, Don with his knobbly knees, shorts, and binoculars, always twittering on about birds (the feathered kind, alas), and "young" Nigel, Mr. Artsy-Craftsy himself, and more of the craft than art if you ask me. A long-haired skinny white wiggling grub, he is. Never see any of them except when they're crawling here on pilgrimage to my bank account.

Now they've had the nerve to stay in my house, without so much as a by-your-leave to me. "We've fixed it all with William," Mary beams, as though they expect me to leap up in my wheelchair and cry out, "Oh, whoopee!" because my servants and family have saved me the trouble of organising my own birthday. Leap? That I should be so lucky. It's no fun being old, being wheeled every-

A number of Amy Myers's stories for *EQMM* recently became available in book form in the Crippen & Landru collection *Murder, 'Orrible Murder.* And that's only one of several Myers books recently released or about to be released. *Murder in Hell's Corner,* from her Georgia and Peter Marsh series, was published by Severn House last autumn; *Murder and King Arthur's Cup* is due in 2007 from the same publisher, and *Tom Wasp and the Murdered Stunner* is due soon from Tekno Books.

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where. You have to work hard to make your own fun when you're a hundred years old.

So, believe me, I have.

"It's high time you updated your will," Mr. Humphrey Bore Bone snuffled to me some weeks ago.

"You're right, Humphrey," sighed I, pretending to be all tired and weary, though only ninety-nine at the time.

I'm not only wicked, you see. I'm also very rich. Perhaps that's the reason for it. Never had a wife, well, not for the last seventy years, so I can please myself what I do with my money. Oh, the pleasure of freedom. I've only mentioned these particular relations, but I've a vast family out there. All the Christmas cards check in dutifully once a year, but now they're all screaming down on me like vultures licking their lips in person at the thought of a slice of my golden pie when I hop it.

"How about charities?" Humphrey said dolefully to encourage me on my will updating.

"How about them?" I said rudely.

"Have you no favourite causes?"

"Only one. Mine," I snapped. Then I relented. Humpity-Humph is a boring old stick but he means well. Perhaps. "Tell you what, Humphrey, you find me a charity that looks after blind atheist stamp collectors with moles on their cheeks or aged aunts who run homes for stray elephants and I'll support them."

He couldn't, of course, so when he sent his bill in I didn't pay him—don't believe in encouraging failure. And, I informed him, I'd be writing my own will, and sending it to him in due course.

Humphrey's eyes had glinted, the first sign of life I'd seen for a long time. He told me that one day my jokes would take me too far. Maybe he's right. Jolly good. Nothing like living dangerously when you're a hundred—in your mind, at least. Fat chance I've got of fighting off sharks or climbing Everest from this chair.

The vultures have landed. I can see them all outside in the garden, gathering for the big feast at my expense. Why should I have to pay for my own birthday party? You'd think if they all loved me so much they'd be queuing up to treat me. No way. I reckon that everyone in that mob below flatters himself he's entitled to walk in and help himself to my money the minute I'm dead. Well, I've scotched that little plan. I've outlived my brothers and sisters—told them all I would, and I did—so it's the next generation and the one after that I have to watch. Mary's in the former category, Nigel and Don in the latter. They march together in the vanguard of the "Why don't you leave it all to me?" brigade. The Three Gargoyles, I call them: always goggling at me with their ugly faces and nothing but water running in their veins.

They'd no sooner arrived yesterday than they bounded up to me to ask if I'd like a trip to my old home next month. Bah, humbug. I

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grew up in a two-up two-down terrace house in Huddersfield. No, I'll stay here in my Surrey mansion, thanks very much, where Woeful William answers my every whim. Most of these are to press Venus's boobs. I've got a bar behind the library books; one touch on the carved lady's tender parts on the panelling underneath and out floats nectar—or whisky, if you prefer its real name. And that's one thing the Three Gargoyles don't know about. Let 'em stick to water. They're welcome to it. If any showed up in my veins they'd burst with shock.

Here come the Gargoyles now. I can see them marching purposefully from the marquee towards the house, and—oh, goodie—Humphrey Bone the Bore is with them. Only William to collect on the way and we're off. Mary's at the front, of course, mutton dressed as lamb, or as I like to think of it, soggy shepherd's pie with a white topping. Don's on one side—trousers today, I see! Even a sporty blazer. I *am* honoured. I can do without the sight of his knees on my birthday. And I can glimpse darling Nigel's supercilious nose poking out on Mary's other side, as he struts along in his artsy pale cream suit. No artist starving in a garret, he. Nothing but the best for him—especially if it comes courtesy of my bank account. Any one of them would see me dead tomorrow if it wasn't for the fact they can't be *certain* who's in my will because I might change it. If only I could see their faces when they find out . . .

Ah well, time for my big appearance. I've been smothered with cards and presents today. Even the Queen sent a card via a minion. She's the only unselfish one amongst them, and she's not getting a slice of anything. Her blinking government will get their paws on anything coming her way in the way of tax. Perhaps I'll send her a lump of stale birthday cake in compensation.

"Well, Uncle Silas, are we all ready?" Mary beamed.

Of course I am, you silly old cow, I wanted to reply, but I could see Humphrey looking at me in that way of his, so I decided to behave. "Hallo, Mary," I quavered. "Think I'd be late for my one glass of champagne?" Not on your life, I thought. Or more pertinently, on mine, which is a great deal more valuable to me.

"Happy birthday, Uncle," Don said heartily, peering at me as though I was a wounded goldfinch.

"Sorry. I'm still alive," I said tartly, and seeing Humphrey's compressed lips, added, "Just my little joke, darling boy." Boy? He looks like an antiquated frog. No, frogs are too lively for our Humph. Toad's more like it. Sits on its bottom and blinks—waiting for the fees to roll in.

Nigel must have been nervous for once. "Many happy returns," he bleated, pumping my hand up and down.

"As a ghost?" I retorted politely, but seeing my grin, the party took this as a witticism in which everyone could join. Even Woeful Willie, looming over me with first-aid kit in hand in case I pass

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out with pleasure at their company, giggled, although Toad Humphrey remained solemn-faced.

So here we go. Off to my hundredth-birthday party. As I was wheeled into the tent the crowds parted like the Red Sea for Moses. Quite right, too. I could see the place was packed, with all those Christmas cards having sprung to life and put their happy, happy faces on, while they waited for the champagne. I decided to make them all listen to me for an hour at least before they got their reward.

At the end of the first half-hour of my speech, I beamed at their now flagging faces. I was wiping their smiles away splendidly.

"And now, my dears," I announced, "I'm going to tell you something very important."

The whole assembled company leaned forward very hopefully. But it wasn't going to be about my will. Oh no. That's going to be a sweet surprise. I didn't talk about money at all. I lectured them on the importance of happiness in families, how nice it was to see them all together getting on so well. Poppycock. My brothers and sisters used to quarrel like a pack of hyenas, and their offspring followed suit. Even Mary, Don, and Nigel couldn't stand the sight of each other normally. They are only united today by a common hope that they alone will be my sole heir. I have, I admit, been teasing each of them separately that he or she is the person to whom I've left all my money. And it's the truth—in a way.

I do like teasing people.

I'm even teasing you, whoever reads this. You're all expecting me to drink my glass of champagne, gag, clasp my throat, and fall gasping for air, poisoned by one of my dearest and nearest kinfolk, unable to wait a minute longer for my millions.

Well, I've news for you. The party's over, and I'm still alive.

"Good morning, Mr. Bone." William opened the door of the manor to me, and led me into the late Mr. Silas Carter's library cum living room. Once it was a dark and sombre place, but no longer. The blinds were up and sunlight streamed in, as if glad to reach the previously forbidden places. I approved. I had always dreaded coming here, but it made my unwelcome task of this morning much easier if the sun was fighting on my side. Silas Carter was, I regret to say, a wicked old man, with a sharp, if lively, tongue. He was no judge of character, however. Assuming the role of boring old lawyer is a useful device for me (and never more so than with Silas Carter) and would be so again in the meeting about to take place.

"My condolences, William," I said formally. Might as well stick to being Humphrey the Bore for the moment. "What will you do once

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everything is cleared up?" It had obviously been sensible for me as executor—at least as *apparent* executor—to ask his carer to stay on while the disastrous mess of the estate was being sorted out.

"I daresay I'll find something. I've always dreamed of a cottage of my own, but it won't be the same." William looked sad. "I've been here over twenty years now."

I could see his point. Being ill-treated in a palace might be more palatable than loneliness in a cottage, and William must be over fifty now. Not an age to go searching for new Silas Carters to tend.

"I've prepared coffee for you all, Mr. Bone. I'll be in the kitchen if you want me. Just ring."

He'd be used to that, all right, I thought as he left me. Everything in its place: cups, saucers, coffee keeping warm. If only my life had been as simple over the estate of Silas Carter: Instead it had presented me with The Great Muddle. Not a word that lawyers take kindly to. We prefer words—and wills—that are cut-and-dried, not muddled. Especially where the family of the deceased are concerned. I was ready to implement my plan, and I was only awaiting the three most vocal of them over their demands to know how matters stood with the will. I fear—no, that is not the word I should be using—in the case of these three, I am *delighted* to tell them. Indeed, I shall relish it. As the old rhyme has it, I do not like thee, Dr. Fell, the reason why I cannot tell. For Dr. Fell, read Mary Simpkins, Donald Paxton, and Nigel Carter. I never have liked them on the rare occasions we have met, but since the events of Silas's hundredth birthday, I have added deep suspicion to my dislike.

These three had stayed in the house the night of Silas's birthday; the latter was also the night of his death. Accidental death, the coroner had concluded, and for someone not personally acquainted with Silas that would be the obvious conclusion. However, I *did* know the old skinflint well. The doctor had been sufficiently imbued with the notion that Mr. Carter would live forever to notify the coroner at his unexpected death. Poor Silas had proved to be stuffed full of his sleeping pills, with only his fingerprints on the bottle and water beaker. Natural enough, the coroner must have thought, for him to be overcome with the excitement of his birthday party and the glass or two of champagne he had drunk there, and not realise the number of pills he was taking.

That old boozer? I knew better. Silas Carter was far too well accustomed to alcohol to be thrown off his usual careful habits by a mere five or six glasses of champagne—I lost count of the number I saw him drink. If ever I saw a man heading for being pickled for posterity by the whisky inside him, it was Silas Carter.

No, it's far more probable that one of the gruesome threesome helpfully crushed his pills up for him and saw them safely down his throat. Which, though? One of them? All three? Did I care? I

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most certainly did. Someone might have cheated Silas out of years of life. I began to look forward to this meeting with some eagerness.

The three hopefuls were on time—indeed, some minutes early—and I decided I would play doddering lawyer as well as a boring one while I fumbled with serving coffee and biscuits and fussed about sugar and milk. By the time I'd finished, they were all twitchy. Ever since I'd seen early Hollywood films with lawyers solemnly reading out wills to the assembled company, I'd wished we had the same tradition here in England, and now I was to get my opportunity—at least to some of those most concerned in this mess. Those who, as Silas had kindly explained in the letter he sent me with "the will," had had expectations. Expectations, as opposed to hope, I suppose. Every Carter in Christendom must have been eagerly searching their family tree on the news of Silas Carter's death.

I wouldn't be reading out the will today, but at least I could enjoy my position of temporary power. Not that Silas had demanded to be buried in Siberia or anything like that. Oh no, he was too cunning.

The trio sat on the huge sofa opposite me like the three monkeys: Hear No Evil, See No Evil, Speak No Evil. And I, when I wish, can be very evil.

"It seems to be taking a remarkably long time to clear up dear Uncle Silas's estate," Mary began jovially. I noticed she'd worn a smart(ish) black suit, clearly hoping to impress me with how businesslike she could be. She needn't have worried; most people get very businesslike when it comes to inheriting money. Donald was more cunning; he had decided on a simple countryman's approach: anorak, casual trousers, and sport shirt. As if to pretend he wasn't interested in sordid lucre. Nigel plainly didn't care. He was playing man about town, with long hair and linen suit and sunglasses. I rather wished the blinds *had* been down. It would have punctured his ego to have to take them off.

"And will take longer," I said gravely, looking at them over the top of my glasses. Instant panic.

"Why?" Nigel ceased to be mysterious, and became very focussed. "It's a simple will, I'm sure. Everything was left to me. He told me so."

Mary looked reproachful. "You misunderstood. It was to me, Nigel. Uncle told me so."

A polite cough from Donald, as though he wished to impress me that he was the reasonable one of the three. He might be right. "To me, actually."

A pause while they summed each other up. "He wanted the family name to continue," Nigel snapped, a trifle more uncertainly now. "So it must be me. You two come through the female line."

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Time for the boring lawyer to put a word in. "Might I enquire *when* he told you this?"

"Several times. The last occasion was the evening he died," Mary said triumphantly as if she'd played an ace. "I went to his room to say goodnight, and he told me I was a good girl and could look forward to a happy, rich retirement."

"What time?" Nigel demanded.

"About eight o'clock," Mary replied with dignity.

Nigel chuckled. "He clearly changed his mind after you left. I went at eight-thirty, and he told me the same."

"That you were a good girl?" Donald sneered. "In fact, you're both barking up the wrong tree, because I went about nine-fifteen, and he told me I was the sole heir. So, if, Aunt Mary, you are telling the truth, or even you, Nigel, Great-Uncle Silas was clearly planning to change his mind and write a new will."

They fell to squabbling, then, until I put in my boring Humphrey cough. "Mr. Silas Carter's confusion that evening could have been induced by the sleeping pills. Was he already feeling sleepy, perhaps, and so didn't know what he was saying?"

"No!" The word was spat out unanimously—hardly surprisingly.

"It's obvious," Mary appealed to me, "he was clearheaded when he spoke to me, and then he either took, or was helped to take," she said meaningfully, "the pills later."

"Are you implying, *Auntie* Mary—" Nigel emphasised the word, probably to help me get the message that she was ancient and therefore out of her tiny mind—"that either Donald or myself administered a fatal dose of sleeping pills to Uncle?"

"If the cap fits . . ." Mary said belligerently.

"Did any of you notice the pills on his bedside table?" I asked firmly. I needed control here.

A pause, while they all thought about their own best interests. "I saw his water glass and a flagon of water. I didn't notice the pills. Did you, Donald?" Mary asked stiffly.

Nigel instantly chimed in to say he hadn't, either, and Donald claimed the moral high ground. "I did, as a matter of fact. I noticed the bottle was nearly empty. Thought I should mention it to William in case Great-Uncle Silas needed a new prescription."

Mary retorted with a stage gasp. A hand flew to her throat. (Nice one, I thought.) "And you didn't think dear Uncle might have taken too many?"

"I didn't know how many pills dear Uncle had left from the night before," Donald snapped back. Perhaps his birds never gave him this trouble. "And might I point out, Aunt Mary, that if he had already taken all those pills he wouldn't have been *compos mentis* enough to talk to any of us."

"Unless one of you is lying," Mary said brightly. "As I was the first there, it's clearly not me."

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Nigel retaliated. "How do we know you went at eight, not ten?"

"Because I say so." Mary stood up angrily, then must have realised this was hardly going to help, so she sat down again.

Divide and rule, I thought. An excellent maxim. I had them all on the run now. Or did I?

"Just a minute, Mr. Bone." From the look on his face Donald was trying to metamorphose into Hercule Poirot. "Why on earth should any of us want to bump dear old Great-Uncle Silas off, even if we did each of us think we were his sole legatee? Not to put too fine a point on it, we'd be getting our money pretty soon anyway in the natural course of events. Moreover, even if he'd left his money among the three of us, we'd get a fair amount each."

The other two rapidly appreciated his point and nodded solemnly. "Quite a few million each, I imagine," Nigel remarked hopefully.

He was right. More than a few, in fact. The three of them smiled at me.

Time for me to puncture their little balloon. I too can be a wicked old man. I sighed heavily. "Do you know how many times Mr. Carter has either changed his will or threatened to?"

There was instant silence.

"I see you do," I continued. "Your point is answered. Need I say more?"

Apparently not.

"All right, then," Nigel said at last, not nearly so belligerently, "what did the blasted will say? Which of us did he leave it to?"

My big moment. Hollywood, here I come. I remembered the delightful letter Silas had written to me with the will. *"You're blasted well going to work for your money, Humphrey, since I shan't be here to see you squander my money."* And then he'd told me why.

Uproar had broken out again as they each debated the merits of their own case for sole inheritance.

I cleared my throat then: "Silence," I roared.

Startled, the three of them instantly obeyed.

"I am sorry to say," I continued blandly, "that none of you is the sole beneficiary."

A silence of a different sort. "You mean we have to share it?" Donald asked warily.

"In a way."

"What the devil does this will say, then?" Nigel was getting very edgy. What a shame, poor lad.

"It's a question of which will," I answered.

"What the hell do you mean?" Nigel roared. "You mean he wrote more than one? That's no problem. The relevant one is the one with the later date. When did—"

"Please!" I held up my hand, looking very grave indeed.

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"Which will?" Nigel's voice went satisfactorily out of control. No pretensions to being artsy-craftsy now. "Were there three of them?"

"No."

"How many, then?" Mary squeaked impatiently.

"Seventeen."

Puzzlement at first, then:

"*Seventeen?* You mean drafts?" Donald asked weakly.

"No, Mr. Paxton. Seventeen wills all fully signed and witnessed and in order. All different in content."

Nigel broke the stunned silence. "The latest is the valid one, you fool. Which is it?"

I was delighted to tell him. "All seventeen wills are dated the same day. All posted that day, too."

"But there must be a way of telling which was signed last. Weren't you present? What the hell were you playing at?" Donald was growing squeaky, Nigel and Mary gaping like goldfish.

"I was not present. All the signatures are valid; all of them, Mr. Carter informed me, were witnessed together by the same two people, a postman and the gardener. Just the signatures; they weren't told what the documents were, I gather." You bet they weren't. They might have spoiled his fun.

"But who are the beneficiaries?" Nigel yelped.

"Each will leaves everything to a different person."

A nice moan from Mary now, but Nigel's brain was meeting the challenge admirably. "You mean there are seventeen people all thinking they're sole legatees?" A short laugh. "Of course the old chap was out of his mind. We can overthrow this easily if—" a glance at the other two—"we stick together."

Good. Another excellent line coming up for me to deliver. "Certainly, Mr. Carter. Provided, of course—"

Instant attention now. "Provided what?" he snarled.

"You have no objection to risking your inheritance. The will asserts that Mr. Silas Carter is writing this in full possession of his faculties—"

"So what? That means nothing—"

"And," I continued happily, "that—to translate into lay terms—if anyone disputes this and tries to upset the will, they lose their inheritance."

"So what the hell happens now? It goes to court? They'll see it's nonsense . . ." Nigel suddenly saw the problem.

"Indeed. Which will be the valid will out of the seventeen?" I took up the reins again. "In such cases, it is usually far more effective to present the court of probate with a way out of the dilemma."

"Which would be?" Mary asked eagerly.

"All seventeen of you have to meet to agree to a solution, the

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most obvious of which is that the net estate be divided among all of you."

"But even we three never agree on anything," Donald wailed.

"Perhaps that is what Silas had in mind," I murmured, although at a rough guess a million or so after tax would provide quite a few feathers to adorn their nests.

The gruesome three looked at each other. "All right." Nigel obviously spoke for all of them. "We'll have to go along with it, I suppose. Who are the other fourteen lucky devils?"

I paused. Now for my best line, which I flatter myself I then delivered with elegance and simplicity:

"I don't know."

They didn't quite follow me at first. Then reality struck. "What do you mean, you don't know?" Donald yelled, in a tone he would never have used within a mile of one of his feathered friends.

"Just that," I replied. "All Mr. Carter sent me was a letter telling me the situation, and just one will. He did not tell me who the other beneficiaries were or where the relevant wills might be found."

A terrible silence now.

"Then how do we know there were any more?" Mary was excelling herself. "It could be an elaborate joke. Dear Uncle was so fond of teasing people. He obviously just wrote the one will—to *me*. Of course."

Nigel glanced at Donald. "Who was the legatee in the will you hold, Bone?"

Now, I don't like being addressed as Bone, and it was therefore with particular pleasure that I put on my best boring-lawyer look of reproof. "I regret I am unable to say. It would be unethical until I have either gathered in the other wills or established whether this is indeed a practical joke."

Donald's lip was trembling. "Then we don't know—" he warbled.

"Precisely." I could not help it. I beamed. "None of you knows whether you have inherited a single bean. It could all, as you yourselves have pointed out, be Mr. Carter's little joke."

After speaking to the family, it did not take long for me to realise how Silas Carter had met his end. At first I had remained inclined to the view that the gruesome threesome had conspired to bring about his death, but discarded this notion. Those three couldn't agree on anything, much less to keep mum about murder. For I had no doubt at all that's what it was. I decided to have one last look at the scene of this crime, and having visited Silas Carter's bedroom with William at my heels, we then repaired to the living room.

"Only those three knew about their presumed inheritance, of

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course," I said casually. "He'd told them, but none of the others." I paused. "Certainly not you, William."

He flushed. "He didn't leave me one, the rotten skinflint."

"So that's why you murdered him, didn't you?"

He went very white, and I quickly pressed Venus's left breast for the whisky. The estate had been paying to keep the supply going. "Me?" he squeaked.

"He told you he wasn't leaving you a penny, and you knew he meant it, didn't you? When you found out about those new wills, you saw your opportunity to get your revenge. If by bad luck the death was queried, there would be plenty of more likely suspects than yourself in the frame."

"How could I have known about those wills?"

"Easily, William. He could get all those wills signed without you, but he couldn't *post* them without you. You wheeled his chair, you saw them go into the box even if you didn't put them in yourself. You probably stamped them, too. Envelopes with wills inside are a distinctive shape, and each one was addressed to a firm of lawyers. So after that you asked him what he was going to do for you, who'd looked after him so faithfully for all those years."

"That don't mean I murdered him."

"Someone did, and it could only be you. The others all assumed the pills were in the water, and only you knew Silas never drank water at night, only whisky. You crushed them up in the whisky glass, removed it in the morning, and put traces of crushed pill in the water beaker."

"There's no proof." William watched me carefully. "You can't go to the rozzers."

"No proof, but I could stir the waters, so to speak. With a murder investigation, probate on those wills could be held up for a long time."

"So what? Nothing coming to me." He looked at me uncertainly when I did not comment. "What are you going to do, then?" he asked.

"I'll tell you what I'm going to do, William." And I did.

Now here we sat two years later, enjoying our last glass of whisky together at Silas's expense. My fees had added up nicely. It had taken nearly all this time before we had finally sorted out the truth, and then we had to hold the meeting for those of the seventeen who wished to attend, and negotiate the agreed division with those who didn't. Two had died in the meantime, leaving further complications with their estates; three preferred not to attend the meeting, but the other twelve met at a most interesting and lively gathering. The Court of Probate duly agreed the resulting settlement, and at last I was free of my obligations to Mr. Carter.

William is a rich man—and so am I—for William was a benefi-

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ciary of Silas's will. Indirectly, that is. In fact, through me.

There never was a seventeenth will, not a genuine one anyway. Silas only wrote sixteen. With so many other wills before them, all with the same text and signatures, save for the legatee's name, how likely was the court to notice that one was forged? Or that, faced with such overwhelming evidence of the letter's truth, the signature to that too was forged. Silas's original letter had stated only sixteen wills. I myself added the seventeenth.

I developed many useful skills during that period of work. I could hardly make the forged will out to myself, but in William I had seen the opportunity I was waiting for. We have gone fifty-fifty on the proceeds. Can I trust him to hand over my share? Of course. He isn't going to risk his inheritance going up in smoke if the will is declared a forgery. Can he trust me not to blackmail him for more? Of course he can . . . I'm a lawyer.

I told you I was a wicked old man.

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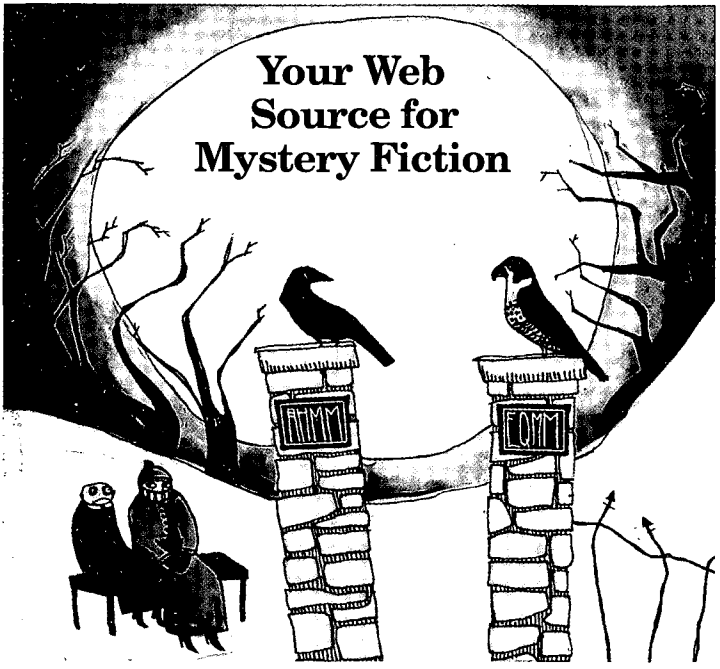

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